Buffy Season Noir

by Anna S (eliade)

Summary

_He was the only person who ever left her whose abandonment she'd truly earned, and he was the only one who kept coming back._

Events went differently in Season 6, after "Gone", and Buffy and her friends try to get back to what passes for normal on the Hellmouth. But wouldn't you know, as soon as they beat back one interdimensional baddie, the portents of yet another "dark power rising" start to appear. Unfortunately, Willow has seen that this time the demon threat will succeed in wiping Sunnydale off the map — especially if it can recruit the Slayer of Slayers to its side — and that's the best case scenario. This permanent WIP is intended as an alternate season of _Buffy._

Note from the poster: This story is _entirely_ by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3. It is a classic of Buffy fanfic, unfinished and likely to remain so. It has only been available via Wayback Machine for the last several years, and deserves a wider readership. A readership which will soon discover a rich and compelling tale by a master of dialog, characterization, and plotting.

Notes

Again, this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), is unfinished, and is likely to remain so.
I see this chapter as the season ender in the season before "season noir," which in itself I've come to realize has to be an alternative season 8; everything branches off from "Gone." Canon will fuck with fictional continuity after a while, of course. Everything begins in media res.

Buffy tried not to look like she was limping as she walked up alongside the boundary wall of the cemetery. Limping did not say: Victorious Slayer on a Rampage--Fear My Kicky Boots! No. Limping said ouch in a small voice, and asked you to wait a moment while the limper rested.

She could have, maybe even should have, stayed home, gotten a good night's sleep--it would have been the first full night in a week. There'd been battle plans to lay out; never restful. And though she'd come to feel a strange affection for the blue tentacled mass in the basement, it'd had a tendency to latch onto the plumbing and make the pipes groan at odd hours which she wouldn't miss. All in all, things had been too wonderland there at the end for Buffy's peace of mind, especially when Dawn moved from snacking on the flower garden to eating books page by page.

But despite her weariness, she'd had to escape the house for a while. Sitting around the old popcorn bowl with Will watching sappy sapphic cinema was...well, kinda nice actually. When Willow was cheerier. In Buffy's memory were snapshots of an old friend, wide-eyed and wide-smiled, eager to help with homework or share gossip; the kind of girl who baked you cookies to take to the apocalypse; comforting and familiar. But her new friend was an unhappier Willow who wore darker shades of lipstick, darker moods. Buffy felt uncomfortably at times that this grown-up Willow had moved on in ways she didn't think Buffy would understand. When Buffy created an elsewhere to be, like tonight, she knew her avoidance wasn't even noticed.

A walk was good, though. Besides, Dawn was catching up with all the friends she'd refused to see while she'd had her horn, and their momless house could still feel empty even when it was full. All signs pointed slayward.

Buffy slipped over the wall at its lowest point, wincing as the maneuver strained her bruised ribs. The gash in her thigh wasn't happy either. I sing the body brown-out, she thought tiredly.

Once on the graveyard grounds, she wandered through the headstones, carelessly scanning for freshly broken earth and footprints. The air had a wet smell, earth and grass opened up by the rain that had fallen earlier, and the moon was full and high, its light covering everything it touched like snow. Crickets chirped, and the place felt peaceful the way cemeteries should and so often didn't. It was late spring, Buffy realized, pages flickering and flying off a mental calendar and she caught up with the passage of time. Classes had ended while her attention was focused on more pressing matters; vamps would be scarcer now that everyone but luckless townies had cleared out for the summer. Most vampires were as seasonal as the human population they fed on, taking their own vacations from the Hellmouth, hitching rides south with unsuspecting co-eds and happy-meal families and dumb gangs of kids in vans. She'd often thought of trying to have vamp awareness integrated into orientation week. In some other reality where she also had her own talk show.
Buffy wound through the plots, heels sinking a bit into the soft earth. The marble headstones glowed in the moonlight and made her notice them as things distinct and real, something she tried not to do during patrols. Unwanted thoughts came, of everyone in her life now dead or gone. Her mother, Giles, Angel, Oz, even Cordelia. How many high school classmates lay here in this boneyard alone--how many graves were instead empty, layered with dust? She'd never tried to keep track and she'd long ago lost count.

Looking up, she discovered her feet had carried her to the center of the graveyard. She stared at the crypt in front of her. Its door hung ajar, as if its occupant had only recently left. But it had been five months. She wanted to turn and walk away; instead she climbed the shallow steps and entered. The door creaked as she pushed it further open. Inside, moonlight striped the floor and she could see a half year's worth of dirt and leaves surrounding the furniture legs. He'd left the less portable stuff behind, and no one had bothered to steal it. Someone--someones--had been using the place, though; beercans and bottles were scattered everywhere, along with burger wrappers and empty blood-bags. Not his. He'd kept it tidy.

The television lay on the floor, smashed. Buffy walked through its broken glass and kicked aside a beer bottle. The hollow rattle disturbed a rat which scuttled out as she moved further in. Skin mags, wrinkled by damp, covered the sarcophagus lid in a lewd display. Now those might have been his. She flipped through the pages of one, found a blonde likeness of herself, and made the obligatory tit check before closing the cover with a sense of superiority.

Toward the back of the crypt, the funk was funkier and a well-ripped sleeping bag had become a nest for what she could only hope were mice. She stopped at the entrance to his underground lair, noticing that the coverstone lay half on, half off the irregular hole.

Nothing good could be down there, but she climbed down anyway, thinking she might get lucky and dust a few trespassers. At the bottom of the ladder, she quickly turned. She'd thought she'd heard a sound and waited to hear it again. After a few seconds, she realized she was standing in a pool of moonlight. Why not just wear a string of Christmas lights and stick a fork in my arm, she wondered. She slipped to one side, annoyed with herself. Maybe her luck for the night was not getting dusted already.

"That's right, Slayer. Don't want to make it too easy."

At the soft words, the hairs on the back of Buffy's neck rose, and the rest of her went stiff with recognition. Her vision hadn't adjusted yet but she strained to decipher something in the dark, anything to reassure herself she wasn't alone with memories that were finally cracking their coffin lid, cracking her. He couldn't be here, she told herself, couldn't have come back; the possibility didn't seem real.

When she'd almost convinced herself she'd imagined his voice, a light flared in the darkness and Spike's face flickered into sight, bent over a cigarette. Cupped hands, sharp jaw, lowered eyes, painted by fire. In the second before the lighter died, he raised his head and looked directly her way.

Left in the dark again, heart pounding, Buffy tried instinctively to fix his last position. She couldn't find the glow of his cigarette that should have been visible. A boot scuff against floor made her twitch and turn blindly, but she sensed mockery. He could move without sound when he wanted to.

"Reflexes seem a bit slow, ducks. Been eating your Wheaties?"

She didn't answer his affected concern, and began edging along the wall, keeping space between them. There was no reason to think he'd kill her, but the whole wait-until-dark vibe was giving her
gooseflesh. She slid a hand into her pocket and gripped a stake for comfort. Any words she might once have said had dried up on her tongue; she'd forgotten how to be flippant with him, it seemed. She wanted to be flippant, cool, uncaring. She wanted to--

"Come now," Spike said, his face materializing close to hers, eyes glittering, skin whitened by the moonlight. His hand shot out to grab her wrist before she even had time to react. "Haven't you got a hello for an old mate?"


Willow looked over nervously. "I'm not, um, entirely sure you should be watching this, Dawnie." She brightened in eager hope. "Hey, how about we see what's on Must See TV, because, you know, Must See." Versus Must Not See, she thought.

"Ohmigod, did you see that?" Dawn squeaked.

"I've, uh, many times." Willow's cheeks were flaming and she stared into her popcorn bowl and focused on selecting and eating one kernel at a time.

"This is so cool. Buffy would never let me watch anything like this," Dawn said, confirming Willow's fears, "even though I'll be seventeen in two months. And mom, tch." She cracked a dry laugh. "I thought I'd be thirty before I got frontal nudity." Her eyes were glued to the screen as she shoveled popcorn in her mouth, and she talked nonstop while she did. "You know, in Africa, women just walk around and let it all hang out, like you and Tara did when it rained pixie dust, remember?"

"That would be a whopping yes," Willow murmured, while Dawn talked over her.

"I'm going to be an anthropologist someday and travel all over the world, and blend in with the natives, except you're not supposed to call them that. I think it's, uh, indignitous--"

"Indigenous."

"--peoples. And the nakedness is maybe not so much a great idea, because they have these worms that can bore up through the heel of your foot and into your brain and it'll swell up and burst. This one woman, she got a brain worm so huge--oh. Wow."

Willow closed her eyes and turned her face into the back of the couch with a tiny groan. She wished she hadn't had that last margarita, and she wished Tara were here. She was so sad and lonely. She was the blues. Snuffling once, she rubbed a hand across her wet eyes and then felt the couch shift as Dawn sat down next to her, knees drawn up to mirror hers. Willow reluctantly turned her face out of the cushions.

"Please don't be unhappy." Dawn smiled and patted Willow's knee, then rested her cheek on the back of the couch for better eye-contact, friendly as a puppy. "You guys can't break up," she said confidently. "You're like superglue."

"I don't feel very gluey." She paused as tears threatened to return, tried to smile back and felt her
smile twisted by the tremble of her lips. "I keep thinking, you know, that I can figure out how to be the right me again--the me I was when I first met her, the one she liked. If I could go back somehow--" At the anxious shadow passing across Dawn's face, Willow wanted to shake herself. Confiding in Dawn called for a certain degree of self-censorship she wasn't sure she was up to now, but Buffy wasn't here, big surprise not, and it wasn't exactly like she could call up Anya, who was likely to say, "There, there, perhaps you can use your vibrator tonight and think pleasant thoughts and then tomorrow bring her some flowers and apologize for being so neurotically needy--do lesbians like flowers?" and what kind of creep am I, Willow wondered. With the blues and the R-rated films and the margaritas. A menace to kidhood. A monster.

She managed to derail her train of thought and find a better smile for Dawn. "Listen to me, all Cosmo girl weepy with the break-up blahs." She clowned a face, rolling her eyes, la la la, look at the silly Willow, then pulled herself up straighter.

Dawn seemed reassured. "See, I've got it figured. It's like, when you're together all the time, it's this great slumber party, except it's not just one night, it goes on and on, like this week back in sixth grade when Cynthia's parents were out of town because her brother was having this really serious operation where they thought he would die--" Dawn hesitated at the memory or its associations and then regrouped. "And, um, so she stayed over here and we watched TV all week and ate brownies until we were sick. I felt sorry for her, but after a while I really wanted to hang by myself or I was gonna whale on her. Especially when she started going on and on about how Billy Lukas really liked...never mind."

"It's probably like that." Willow smiled and squeezed Dawn's hand. "We're just need to spend some time apart...again." Hanging ourselves. "Hanging separately."

"Right. But you'll get back together." Dawn smiled knowingly in return. "You guys always do."

"What are you doing here?" Buffy asked. Her voice sounded steadier than she felt. She hoped. His thumb was resting on the pulse of her wrist, rubbing across it familiarly. It was the most intimate touch she'd had in months, and it made her mouth dry even as memories flooded back. So much for her boyless, Buffycentric vacation from romance; so much for alone time. She'd never really believed her own spin, anyway. It had been for the others. The others who weren't her, standing here, with Spike not-breathing inches from her face.

He was smiling with one side of his mouth, with tiny muscles. "Glutton for punishment, I expect." Smoke from his cigarette twisted slowly between them and it was so quiet Buffy heard when he dropped it to the ground. With a last caress, he released her wrist, then climbed the ladder in a swish of leather.

After a moment, she followed. Looking up as she breached the entrance, she saw that he was extending his hand to help her. In her mind, she took it. In reality, she ignored it. He gave her an annoyingly knowing look, then hip-rolled away.

"Place has gone to hell," he said. Bottles clinked wherever he walked; he took no care, and then began actively kicking them.
Buffy circumnavigated the sarcophagus, trying to be where he was not. Across the room, he wandered around with his back mostly turned, hair silvered by the moonlight, face glimpsed only in jigsaw profiles of shadow as he idly contemplated the wreckage.

"Should feel like home," she said, and then was almost embarrassed for herself. This is the new and witless Buffy, she thought. Quip-challenged and unfunny.

He turned to look at her, head cocked like a bird's. "So it does," he answered. But his voice was quiet. He was studying her, from boot tips to recent hair cut, and it made her look away, made her move restlessly.

"Hurt yourself?" he asked.

"What? Oh." She glanced down at her ankle. "It's just lameness." She paused. "Of the ankle. A little...nothing."

"You're all banged up," he observed.

Buffy touched the bruise on her cheek self-consciously, trying to gauge how much it had healed since she last looked.

"More of a big nothing," he said. He came closer, and she made one tight fist without thinking. Once, he might have stopped at that gesture, respected her territoriality, her space. Now he just paused with a smile and touched two fingers to his temple, a mocking salute to the permanence of Initiative technology, before continuing on as if entitled; walking right up close and personal to tilt her face with his hand. And she let him. She wasn't sure she could have made herself stop him, even if he had been feeding again.

His touch was light but it made her eyes close in surrender, as simple as that, and she waited, expecting a kiss. He would take the opportunity, because here they were. When he didn't she opened her eyes and found him considering her.

"What?" she said, discomfited. Her cheeks grew hot.

"Where's the knock-down, drag-out?" he asked. He seemed faintly hurt, even more faintly hopeful. "Thought for sure if I ever showed up, you'd come at me for a scrimmage."

And just like that, there was her anger, bubbling up from inside. "If that's all you came back for, I'll be glad to kick your ass," she said. Rigid with rage, she changed her mind in an instant. "No, you know what? Forget it. Stay, go, I really don't care." She turned to walk away, and he grabbed her, but she didn't break free. "I'm not fighting you, Spike," she said, keeping her back to him.

"You'd let me kill you now?" he asked, words without air against her ear, one hand coming up to clasp her throat. The pads of his fingers were cold and strong. His body pressed against hers. "I don't think so, Slayer."

"Kill me now," she said calmly. "Have your one good day."

His hand held steady at her throat, then slid across to her shoulder and turned her. He looked as wounded and confused as she felt. "Buffy--"

"I'm so over the whole kick-me, kiss-me dance I can't even begin to tell you," she said, gazing up at him with a resolve she willed to be real.

"That was our song." Spike stroked her hair, soft touch a counterpoint to his deadly hard voice.
"Our dance."

"Our last dance was five months ago. If you haven't learned any new moves, you shouldn't have come back."

He dropped his hand, outrage filling his face. "Bloody hell. Bloody buggered--" He spun away from her, smacking his head with the heels of both hands, strangling and punching thin air. "--hell!" Then he roared in a way that was still vaguely alarming, no matter how jaded to it Buffy liked to think she'd become.

"I can't believe you, Slayer." He stared daggers at her, while managing to look amazed. "You twisted, stupid bint. You bloody well know why I left!"

"Hey!" Who you calling stupid, she thought reflexively.

"I begged you to love me, even just to care." He held the air in front of her as if molding the shape of her heart. "Never, you said." His hands fell apart: nothingness. "I wanted something else with you, something more." Arms dropped to his sides. Buffy tried to process his words separately from what his body said, but they spoke one after the other, punctuation after punch. He touched his fingers gently to her chest, over her heart. "I'd have been whatever man you wanted." And he shoved her, letting the motion propel him away with eerie lightness. "But you didn't want me except for shags and laughs."

"Laughs?" Buffy asked, dazed.

"Well, okay," he conceded. "Shags." He glared again. "Shags and secrecy and all your friends having their fun at my expense when you finally let slip. 'Ccept you didn't tell them everything, did you. 'Oh, Spike, he's just a fancy dog I keep leashed for when I can't get my sodding rocks off any other way.' You figured they'd buy that, never know how you cuddled up when you were lonely, let me read poetry to you. God," he laughed sharply, "what a git I was. And what a talent you have, precious, for stringing the blokes along. I don't know how Angel ever kept from offing you once he had the chance."

Tears in her eyes, she smacked him hard, or would have, but he caught her hand.

"Reflexes are slowing, aren't they. How many good years you got left now, love--two, three? You're the geriatrix of slayers." He let go her hand while she fumed.

"You had the chance to off me just now," she said coldly, hands clenching to prevent trembling. "Why didn't you take it?"

"Because I'm bloody mad, you bitch! I'm out of my ravin' skull!" He struck a pose and pointed to his head. "I'm starkers, off my nut, two bob short of a trolley ride--"

"I get it," Buffy broke in, edgy but exasperated.

"Yeah, right. You get it." He stared her down. "You get nothing." Gaze dropping from hers, he looked over rudely. "In fact, I'll wager you haven't gotten it in a while, have you." He snaked toward her gracefully, swaying, leering. "Hard act to follow, isn't that right. And no one else knows what you need, do they, love?"

He cupped her jaw and she tried to twist away, but her feet were rooted to the ground and she couldn't evade him. Wasn't letting herself. When his teeth raked lightly across her throat, she gasped, and when he dropped to his knees she had to put her hands on his shoulders to steady herself. He ghosted his face across her hips, and she braced her legs, flooding with desire. But he
pulled his head back and looked up at her, forcing her attention. He took her hands.

"I've asked twice. Asked one word from you. If not love, a crumb of care. I've starved myself for you." His eyes burned dark. "I won't ask again."

"Don't," she said and then had to stop and find the words stuck in her throat. "Don't ask now. I just. I don't know--"

"Yes, you bloody well do. You know, Buffy. If you care or not." Months apart hadn't dimmed the ferocity in him. Even Angel had never been this obsessive; and Angelus, who had been, had never loved her. Spike's courtship--Spike himself--should have been pathetic. She'd felt that way about him, once; she just couldn't remember how. He held her hands fast, fingers folded into hers. It was as if he were praying up to her, as if he believed despite himself that she was far above him. And she did feel above him; looming like a statue, like stone, but cracking now, cracking open. He was the only person who ever left her whose abandonment she'd truly earned, and he was the only one who kept coming back. A tear slipped down her cheek.

"Get up," she said.

He rose for her, guardedly watchful, and she could see in his eyes that he was riding the knife-edge of hope and disappointment. She could see everything in his eyes.

"I," she said, admission ripping through her and the price might be too high but right now she didn't, "care." The words came out woodenly, as if she didn't mean them, and she could see the uncertainty in his face and she said them again, more firmly this time, magic words opening everything: "I care." And he stared into her eyes, his own dark ones seeing through to where she hid, and the ground went out from under her feet, and she was falling and whispered, "I care," as she understood at last that it was true. And his eyes were widening and opening to her, and could vampires feel joy, she wondered, but she didn't have to ask, because he was kissing her desperately and she was kissing him back.

"Sweetie, do you think we're in a rut?"

"Hmm?" Xander didn't look up from his Starlog because if he did, Anya was likely to fix her bright, pretty and yet somehow slightly cobra-like eyes on him and he'd be compelled to have the relationship conversation, which he was so not up to having tonight, because she'd agreed with good cheer that this was officially Relax-O-Night, a time when post-apocalypse-averting heroes could kick back to Seinfeld and a frosty cold one and--

She grabbed the magazine from his hand and tossed it behind the couch with frustration, and then rapped him on the head with her sharp little knuckles.

Xander stared at his empty hands which were splayed out in the shape of a magazine, uttered a thoughtful hmm, and then looked sideways at his girl. He gave her the crooked smile of patient and oh so friendly manliness, the one that occasionally masked a big serving of annoyance, but hey, he didn't drink to excess. He didn't beat her. A man could be annoyed in the privacy of his own painfully ringing skull.
"Ow," he said, because it was good to remind the ex-demon that pain hurts the other person, then: "Hey, An," as if the thought had just occurred to him, "wanna talk?"

She glared at him, managing to look worried and pissy and loving all at once. "I do want to talk, yes." She glanced at his temple. "How is your extraordinarily thick head?" She rubbed it gently with fingers that smelled of fresh nail polish and flowery lotion and then rubbed harder and harder, frowning as her thoughts worked her up again, until Xander thought the friction might start a brushfire. He gently disengaged her fingers, folded her hand between his own, smiled the patient smile again.

"What?" he asked.

She cast her gaze down in guilty frustration, then back up. "It's just that we sit here every night, you with the dumb TV on with the shows that aren't funny, and reading those magazines about things that aren't real, and I sit here and wonder if I'm supposed to learn how to knit, and I don't know how people go through sixty years of this. Why can't we take a cruise?"

Xander felt the familiar boggle coming on. Remember, he told himself: changeable minx, not psycho freak. "I thought you liked Seinfeld?"

"All right," she grudged. "I do. I like when the bald man gets angry. He speaks his mind and he understands the importance of money. Like me. I identify with him," she said, somewhat proudly.

"Yes, you do, honey." Often, he thought. "So, no rut, right? Seinfeld good, Anya happy." He squeezed one side of her face gently and made a dimpling smile appear. If he was lucky, the conversation would disappear.

"Yes." Then the smile dropped away abruptly and her eyes blazed. "No! Stop being so tricky. I dislike when you manipulate me." She slapped his hand down. "Don't touch my cheeks." Then she pulled her hands from his. "Or any part of me."

Xander had hoped to avoid the real heart of the matter, which had come up six times that week already. "Anya, we can't go on a cruise. That costs money."

"We have money. The store is doing well, and you've gotten another raise."

"It costs the kind of money we don't have," he clarified. She stared at him, incomprehending or not wanting to comprehend, but her face was unhappy and it moved him in that strange way that felt like indigestion. "But you know what," he said. "We could start a special account at the bank and set a bit aside each month until we have enough." And that was all it took for her to brighten, and it was a happy moment, because Xander knew that once that money became a hefty lump, she would suddenly not want to spend it, or she would want to spend it on a bigger apartment instead. Or shoes. He felt sure he'd be spared any trips on the Love Boat.

I am a master strategist, he thought comfortably as they cuddled.

Anya tucked her head against his shoulder, ran her fingers up and down the buttons of his shirt. "I'm so glad you're not a ghost anymore," she murmured.

"Me too, sweetie."

"You were all woo-hoo except it was sad and not funny, and I missed you even when you were there. When you die--"

"Whoa!"
"--a long time from now, I think I'd prefer it if you don't haunt me. Oh, I know it's kind of a romantic gesture and I can see why some people choose it, but really, once you die you should just let go. It's unhealthy otherwise." She tipped her head back, looking to him for affirmation.

Xander stroked her hair. "I have to say I agree with you. Well," he caught himself, "except for Buffy."

"Well, yes." There was a small pause. "You don't think she'll come back, do you?"

"Buffy?" he asked, bewildered.

"That witch with the floaty hair," said his anxious honey.

"Oh, no way. We kicked Sister Nature's strangely attractive but deeply dangerous butt."

"Don't call her attractive."

"Yes, dear."

"Did you really find her attractive?"

"No, dear."

Anya shifted and sat up, frowning as if ready to get quarrelsome, but her thoughts had veered again. "It's just that...we all saw her go poof and turn into a tree, but no one really knew if that's what Willow's spell was supposed to do, and Buffy didn't chop the tree down and I don't have closure." She hesitated, glanced at him as if working up to say something she didn't want to say. With Anya, that could never be good. Her next words came out in a rush: "Xander, I found a frog in the sink today."

He raised his brows. "Cute little froggie?" He smiled, a bit bemused. He didn't really get what was bothering her, unless maybe frogs were some new phobia to supplement bunnies, oh joy, but he tried to ease her mind. "It probably just hopped in from the balcony, got a bit lost looking for a rest stop and an order of flies to go."

"Xander." She leaned in urgently, voice dropping to a whisper of things bad and wrong. "It had wings."

Out in the woods a hawthorn tree stood where it hadn't stood the day before, branches heavily laden with white flowers that had blossomed overnight. Despite the youth of the tree, the spirit it harbored was old and her roots went wide and deep--and also reached out above ground in a way not entirely natural. The wooded hush around this particular tree was apparent the closer one moved toward it, except to the two lovers stumbling through the brush, lost in the dark.

"Ow," said the dark-haired girl, coming to a halt and releasing her partner's hand, "Tom, stop, my foot's caught in something. Damn it. These are new shoes." She bent over and picked at the torn strap of her fifty-dollar sandals while her boyfriend swung the flashlight back. "Great," she said, straightening up and flinging the sandal at him. "Just great."
"Hey, come on." He flashed the beam ahead, through the thinning trees. "We're almost there. I can see the--"

"That's what you said an hour ago. I'm tired." She slumped down under the hawthorn, where the moonlight seemed to have a little extra glow, and leaned back with a groan.

"Mandy, come on." Tom looked baffled by her collapse.

"Stop shining that thing in my face," snapped Mandy. Tom lowered the light. "I'm tired. I've sprained my ankle. I want to rest."

Tom hovered, casting glances toward the nearness of their destination. He knew the look-out point where they'd parked was just beyond the break in the trees ahead. But if it was that close, they could afford to sit a minute. Reluctantly he dropped down near her, crosslegged on the damp grass. He reached out and rubbed her ankle, and was rewarded by a stretch of tan legs and a glimpse up her skirt. He put his flashlight down and began massaging her ankle more enthusiastically. It was kind of a romantic spot, really, the kind of place a guy could get lucky. He let go of Mandy's ankle and reached behind him into his back pocket.

"What are you doing with that?" the girl asked, a note of unease creeping into her voice.

Tom flicked the knife open, grinned and scooted closer. "Just going to immortalize our love, baby." He dug the knife into the trunk by her head, and she watched as he carved their initials into the bark.

She was murmuring encouragement to him, her head turned slightly back over one shoulder and her young body stretched out in a timeless pose, and so she didn't see the tree root by her ankle begin to move in a way roots shouldn't. It uncoiled among the fallen petals and took on a life of its own, separating from the tree which had mothered it. In moments it was a quietly hissing snake.

"True love forever," Mandy commanded, and as Tom's knife dug obediently into the bark again, screamed. The knife slipped with jagged force, and he yelped as her fingers dug into his arm. She was wailing and shoving into his arms. He grabbed her, bewildered by the sudden storm, not knowing whether to soothe or shake an explanation out of her. "A snake bit me," she moaned.

Tom turned and saw the snake sliding off with a sharp rattle of its tail. "Oh my god," he said, "oh my god." He'd been a Scout, he'd wilderness camped all his life, and he'd never seen anyone get bitten before, but he knew what he had to do. He laid Mandy on her back as she struggled and cried, and took her foot in his hand. "Okay," he said, "okay, hold on. This is going to hurt, okay, but you've gotta hold on." He wiped his knife on his jeans, cut open the bite, and then sucked at the venom, spitting out mouthfuls of blood as quickly as he could.

Blood spotted the drift of petals on the ground, and sank into the earth to mingle with the roots below. The glow around the two lovers intensified, rising as a mist from around the nearest trees and coalescing around them unnoticed, until the earth shook and cracked and then they had no time to notice anything as they tumbled together into the newly made fissure.

The trunk of the hawthorn split down the middle and collapsed in on top of them.

When the shaking subsided and the mists had rolled back, the ground was smooth again and a woman in white stood alone, smiling and looking around her. Woodland animals began to creep out from the trees to lay gifts at her feet in a manner reminiscent of early Disney, followed by a tiny army of leprechauns, elves, and fairies not native to the California woods.
"Thank you, thank you all so much. You like me, you really like me." She beamed and wiped a small tear from the corner of one eye, nodding at the kindness of her followers; then stretched languorously, lifting her hair and letting it cascade down her back. A yawn escaped her and she delicately placed a hand over her mouth until it passed.

"It's really extraordinary how revitalizing a catnap can be. I feel ready to take on the world again." Her smile was of a loveliness rarely seen outside certain precincts in heaven and in hell, her eyes black as jet as she lifted her gaze outwards, seeking some distant vision.

"And I think I know where to start."

They were holding hands in a sappy way, not quite swinging their arms as they walked through the graves. Buffy hoped no other vamps would pop up and spoil the mood...of the...graveyard. Okay, scratch that. But she also hoped none of her friends turned up. She wasn't ready. She stole a glance at Spike, decided not to mention unreadiness of any kind. Only the disgusting beeriness of the crypt had prevented them from rutting right there on its floor. Prevented her, that is. He'd been all systems go, groaning in hunger and then in frustration when she called halt, and now he carried the jittery tension she attributed to blue balls. She had a little blue something herself.

"So what have you been up to, Slayer? What big bad did I miss that's got you painted up so pretty?"

"CliffsNotes version?" Buffy took a breath. "Well, all those strange things that kept happening--talking trees, pixies--turned out to be the magical infestation of a mega-witch operating out of a sacred grove in Breaker's Woods. Xander became a ghost, Willow and Tara went all wacky womynfest on us, then Dawn grew a horn and started eating us out of house and library, not to mention daisies, and I basically had my hands full keeping the kindergarten class in line."

"Um, not that I should have to ask but--"

"Figurative, not literal."

"Right."

"Your timing is actually quite peccable." Buffy gave him a wry, sidelong smile. "We could have used your help last night. Big battle, much witchiness--"

"Hold on, know this one--white queen takes black, cue trumpets, all is snug and cozy again in Sunnyhell."

Buffy smiled down at her boots as they began climbing a rise. "Something like that."

There was a silence until they reached the top and sat next to each other on a stretch of wall where the trees were thick and low-hanging, leaves still in the breezeless spring air. Freed from Spike's hand (strong hand, callused though it had no good reason to be, with the kind of skin that would feel both smooth and rough when it stroked--stop--change course) Buffy rubbed her own hands nervously down her pants. She could feel him watching her, but when she looked up he was looking away, out through the leafiness surrounding them.
"Must admit I'm glad the trees have shut up. Boring conversationalists, the lot of 'em." He lit a
smoke, blew smoke restlessly. "So what's it to be?" he said, and despite the vagueness of the
question Buffy knew what he was asking. What was it to be, between them.

"I don't know," she said. At least it was honesty. She'd always been able to speak honestly to him.
Except about the most important thing; and now that had been swept out from under the rug too.
She felt...swept clean. And it made her nervous, even a bit afraid.

Silence settled.

"You know what's the worst thing about being undead?" Spike asked suddenly. He glanced at her.
"Bein' unemployed."

Buffy raised her brows, bemused. She didn't believe him for a second, but she knew about filling
awkward silences with meaningless words. "I thought you were, like, a gentleman of leisure way
back when."

"Lord, no. I was studying to become a barris--" He cut himself short and stared off into space long
enough to make her curious. "A solicitor," he finished finally. Something in his tone signaled to
Buffy that this was an admission. "I was studying to be a solicitor."

"Oh." She didn't know what to say to that. "That's like a lawyer, right."

"More or less."

"You could go back to school," she suggested, knowing even as she said it that she'd slipped into
old facetiousness. The idea was absurd. "Night school," she amended, trying to save the idea from
any tinge of mockery.

But he just laughed. "Bugger that. I hated the law. Stuffy, dull, dealin' day in and out with people's
grubby little troubles. I wanted to write."

"There you go," she said, waving a hand with voila. "Laptops are portable, battery-operated, and
come in kicky new colors. You could be the next Anne Rice. You could kick Anne Rice's ass."

He was smiling her way with head tilted, clearly entertained, his lashes cutting up and down as his
gaze fanned her. "Right little cheerleader, you are." He took a last lungful of smoke, pitched his
cigarette, and straightened up with an air of resolution. "And why not? I could do it. I've got a
hundred years on that clueless bint. At least," he paused thoughtfully, "I think I do." Then he
catched her gaze and relaxed, eyes glinting in a way that suggested he'd puffed himself up only to
tease her. "Course, maybe I want to gather some more material first."

"Well, you could get some tonight." She turned her head quickly and caught him smirking. "I
mean, I have to go up to Breaker's Woods." She shrugged one shoulder. "At least, I was thinking
about it. I'm not sure--" She hesitated. "Let's just say I've got some doubts about how we played
the endgame. I'd be happier if I'd ground Good Witch Glinda under my heels instead of just
knocking her off the board."

"Oh, like that was it?" Spike stood. "Right. Let's go then."

Buffy didn't move, and Spike, waiting on her, gave an inquiring look. "It's just," she said, not
wanting to go home, "I thought maybe you had...a car?"

He grimaced as if embarrassed. "Well, yeah. Guess you could call it that."
"Xander," Willow said in surprise, standing back to let him in, then noticing Anya. Suddenly far more conscious of her lank hair and sniffle-red nose, she tugged her robe together. "Hey, guys. Come with the inness." Their late and sudden arrival was spooking her. "Is something wrong?" Not Tara, she thought, heart hitting her before reason could block; please no. But the looks on their faces were not that grim and she kept it together.

Xander tucked his hands in his pockets; shoulders hunched high, he gave an odd shrug. "We were going to ask you that." He sort of looked around the foyer as if expecting to see something that wasn't there. "You haven't noticed anything...wiggy?" he asked, managing to draw out the words so slowly she could have slapped him twice before he finished.

"No and, hello, let's take a moment to embrace the technology. Ring, ring, 'Hey, Willow, we just called to say that no one has died or been maimed or eaten by wild ducks and by the way, we'll be over shortly.'"

"We're sorry." Anya poked Xander's ribs. "I said we should have called. They wouldn't be in bed, you said. Look. She's wearing her jammies with the little elephants."

"They're lesbian elephants," snarked Willow as if offering political correction, annoyed at the condescension she knew Anya didn't feel yet nonetheless managed to infuse into every word that came out of her thin, demony little lips. "They're lesbiphants."

The other two stared at her, Xander with mouth slightly open, Anya with brows uplifted high on her bony forehead.

"Will, are you--" Xander paused. "Drunk?"

"I'm margarita-ed," she said, smiling in a warning way. "And since it's oh, hey look, midnight, I think I'm entitled to a nightcap."

"And I bet your head is mighty warm under all those nightcaps," said Xander, brows twitching in dry comment.

Anya darted a look between them. "We came over because of the frog," she said, leaning in confidingly.

"Oh, of course." Willow smiled wider. "The frog." She nodded understandingly, and just let it lie there. This is the drunken midnight frog-chat that is my hell. Nodding, smiling.

"The frog with wings. In our sink."

Xander's jaw was twitchy, and Willow wasn't surprised when he resumed command of the conversation. "Anya found a frog today, with wings. In the sink," he summarized.

Meaningfulness began to penetrate Willow's fog. "Today," she said, frowning and looking back and forth between them. "Maybe it, uh, sort of hung around," she said hopefully, "like leftovers? Like a froggie bag."

"Well, that would be the best scenario." Xander kept looking around. "We were kind of wondering if you'd seen anything--"
"Wiggy," finished Willow, getting it now. Brow furrowed, she looked around too. "Well, we should, um, probably look in the basement."

"Yeah, I was thinking that." Xander led the way there, and flipped on the light at the top of the stairs. Willow crowded with Anya at his shoulder while he peered down the steps. "I don't see Big Blue," he said, but walked down anyway and did a search. "Nothing," he called up, then returned to where they waited in the hall.

"We should check for Dobby too," said Willow.

Xander opened the hall closet. "Yo, Dobs," he called into its depths. He shoved the coats and set them swinging back and forth. "Come on out, buddy, show your little elf-self." After a few moments, he closed the door. "Nothing," he said.

Willow felt the tension in her chest begin to loosen again.

"This is good," said Anya, equal relief lightening her voice. "This is very good. The frog is clearly an--an anomaly." Her hands spread out as she offered this idea to them with obvious pleasure.

"A small parting gift," said Xander in a bright voice, "and thank you for playing."

They all laughed weakly and a bit awkwardly, and then Willow heard the soft pad of footsteps on the stairs and turned to smile at Dawn's arrival, but her smile faded at the sight of the younger girl's face. "Oh no," she said, and the others turned and looked.

Dawn stood gripping the railing and stared down at them teary-eyed. "It's back," she cried. "Why is it back?"

And Willow stared at the unicorn horn growing from Dawn's brow and didn't have an answer.

"An SUV," she said out of the blue, after five minutes had passed without a burst of laughter and he'd thought himself safe from further mocking. He grit his teeth.

"For the last time, pet, if you don't--"

"But you stole an SUV." Buffy stifled a giggle.

"You learn to take what's handy," he huffed, getting sucked into defensiveness despite himself, "when you're--"

"--fiend of the road," Buffy finished, pretty much singing the words.

Spike pretended to scowl, but secretly he was amazed at her giddy good humor and counted himself the luckiest corpse walking the earth. Or, currently, driving. It had been touch and go there for a bit, as it ever was with Miss Can't-Make-Up-Her-Bloody-Mind. Except she finally had made it up.

For now.
She'd turned off his music only to pick through his CD wallet. She was making little snorting noises. He wasn't sure how she could see titles in the dim interior, but didn't question it. He didn't want to question anything. Sitting next to her and driving away from Sunnydale was a fantasy Spike wanted to sustain for as long as he could. A vampire driving an SUV. Big joke, that. But truth was he felt odd, precariously balanced between normal and not, suddenly unsure which was which. Was abnormal all those fat families with their kiddies and bright-picnic lives, or was it him, hanging around like a ghost in the world's machine? It was all about machines now, and he'd never tried to understand them more than was needed to get by, but tonight--tonight he was one of those smooth blokes in a car advert. Sweeping along the road, free as fuck all. Brilliant. He hadn't even painted over the windows yet, driving only at night, and now risk paid off in widescreen fantasy, Buffy next to him all belted up and girlish, the road ribboning beneath his wheels, white lines disappearing as he picked up speed. The trees here were big, grey waves streaming above them on each side, and the stars glittered between them in a strip of black heaven.

He hadn't called the sky heaven in a hundred years. Not even to curse it.

Spike's mind dwelled in itself, sketching a carnival-colored nightmare of a thousand endless nights of driving, a flash forward of cheap hotels, neon diners, blood and coffee and booze and music and Buffy. All the simple pleasures, stripped of evil, as he'd be if she commanded him. It was laughable, but there you were. Even in the privacy of his own fantasies he cut a ridiculous figure.

Reality wasn't that different from dreams, but it hurt better.

"I know how vamps get out of the trend loop," said Buffy, "but retro? So over." She tucked the CDs on the dash and settled back in her seat.

"Hell, girl. You don't just dismiss Sid as 'retro' for some flavor-of-the-month boyband--"

"I do not listen to boybands!"

"And not that I was going to say anything, but I happen to know that bitty excuse for a top you're sportin' is five years past its expiry date--"

"Look who's talking--"

"--and those boots were made for walkin' into a Salvation Army--"

"--clearly the same red shirt you've owned for the past two centuries--"

"--scalped a cat and stapled it to your head--"

"--jeans could stand up by themselves and kick your ass better than I could--"

"--might want to give the gods of disco a rest from your prayers--"

"--you big--meanie!"

Spike broke off, laughing in astonishment. "Beg pardon?"

"You heard me." She crossed her arms and stared out the window, sulky miss, and he found he couldn't stop laughing. He drove off the road, nearly hit a tree, braked and rested his head on the wheel. He had tears in his eyes.

"Okay, I'm thinking brain injury," said Buffy after a minute. "Because otherwise? Really wigged out over here."
"Oh," he said, sitting up and wiping his eyes before narrowing them her way. "The dead can't laugh, is that it?"

"No," she said, frowning at him. "It's out of character. It's like--oh! You're like the Fonz." She pointed her finger at him with triumph he couldn't have cared less about.

"Who's that, love?" He slid closer to her. "One of those band boys?" He inhaled her clean soap and blood scent. Licked her neck.

"Stop. You're all skanky," she murmured, and perversely tried to kiss him, but she was belted in and he was not and he avoided her mouth and moved his own to her breasts, and she groaned.

"Not here," she said. "Not--ohhh--here."

"What about here, then," he asked, kissing her flat little belly.

"No. Oh god. Well, maybe...no!"

Smirking, he sat up. Teasing was near as good as doing. "Ever shagged in a moving vehicle?" he asked, honestly curious.

"Don't even."

He put the thing back in drive and laid his arm on the open window. He felt unbearably smug, ready to take on the world. Next to him Buffy mirrored his pose, arm on her own window. The wind blew in the smell of her skin, the life caught in her golden hairs.

"You haven't told me what you've been doing," she said, after a mile had slid away.

Spike thought about lying to her but knew he wouldn't, except by omission. "Went to New York, made the rounds. Caught a cargo ship to London, made the rounds. Came back." He paused, musing. "World's a smaller place now than it was. Something to be said for those big engines."

"You visited London?" He could feel Buffy looking his way in the dark. "You didn't...did you see. No, of course you didn't." She finished the thought as if talking to herself.

"Who, Giles? Well, yeah. Wouldn't let a visit to Merry Old go by without dropping in on your watcher, would I. Course, he wasn't too happy to see me. At first. But he came 'round. More polite than I'd expected, actually. Bought me a pint, asked for the news, didn't stake me."

She was broody and quiet after that, and he let her be.

"We have to go back to the grove," said Willow with a determination not matched by her rumpled elephant jammies or the look of worry on her face. She was sitting on the couch, and her drunken daze was not cute, and the way she stared unseeingly in the direction of the TV made Xander flash on Night of the Living Parents so strongly that he had to jam his hands in his pockets to keep from...well, from doing anything he shouldn't, like maybe yelling at her, though that didn't have anything to do with his hands. No, it didn't.
"We need to find Buffy," he countered. "We need to find Buffy and get a plan."

"Right." She swallowed and tore her gaze from the TV set, but only to stare down and out into space. She wasn't looking at him. "Buffy. She's on patrol."

"Of all the nights," began Xander, then turned and fell silent as Anya came in.

"She's fine," she said, looking between their concerned faces. "She's just sobbing in the way that...girls do who have sudden unsightly horns on their foreheads. Unfortunately, concealer is out of the question." Her slim hands were clasped together, almost wringing themselves, and Xander would have gone over to hug calm her with a hug, but a crisis wasn't the time for calm. It was the time for big, ugly panic.

He took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm going to take a quick drive around town, hit the hotter graveyard nightspots, see if I can find her. You two stay here in case she comes back."

"I want to go with you," said Anya predictably, shimmying up to him as if mere proximity could sway his mind.

"Better if you stay here," he said. He took her shoulders, turning his back on Willow, lowering his voice. "Look after Dawn and--" He jerked his head slightly behind him. "See if you can get her sobered up."

"Okay."

"I don't understand," Willow was saying from the couch when Xander turned around again. "That spell worked, I know it. She couldn't have come back." She gazed up at Xander, imploring him to believe her. "I mean, in retrospect, we should've cut her down, yeah, I'm not saying it wouldn't have been the smart thing to do. But she was a tree--she should've stayed a tree."

"Yeah," he said quietly. "But some things don't stay where they're supposed to."

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There was a wind up on the hill that hadn't been in the valley, and Spike thought the forest's low rustling had somewhat stranger undertones than mere furry beasties could account for. Not that he was unnerved, but he always liked to know what surrounded him, be it woodchucks or warlocks or things that go bite in the night. He started to fish out a cigarette, then changed his mind and shoved the pack back in his pocket. Smoke gets in your eyes.

"Take it that's your sacred grove down there?" he asked, squinting at the glow in the distant trees, where a ring of what looked like dwarves were dancing a jolly may-pole round some bint in flimsy linens and a posed crown. He thought nostalgically of Victorian postcards.

"Yeah," said Buffy grimly. "Looks like Glinda didn't go down easy." He'd forgotten that tough-little-kitten way she had of remarking on the obvious. She crouched in a hunter's pose, watching the treeline and obviously plotting out moves in her head. "We can't do this alone," she said with reluctant decision. "We'll have to get the others."

We, Spike thought, warmth flaring in his cold depths. "We'll do that, then."
She stood, brushed off her jeans in a strangely fastidious and endearing manner, then focused on him suddenly with an intensity that would have taken his breath away, if he'd had any. "I didn't--you don't have to do this," she said.

Surprised, he had no idea how to reply except by brushing her words off. "Not like I've got anything better to do."

"Than fighting a crazed nature-babe to dusty death?"

"Well, when you put it like that." He stuck his hands in his pockets, flexed his shoulders. "Wait--we are talking her death, right?"

She searched his eyes and he watched something dark pass across hers. Her solemnity falling away, she grabbed his head and pulled him down for a kiss close enough to sunlight that he should have burned to ashes on the spot. He drew out his hands, took hold of her waist as if he might lose her otherwise. The kiss lasted so long he grew dizzied, and there was no reason he should, except she was his cross, his bloody kryptonite. The more he soaked up her presence, the more he--

Breaking away with a gasp, she pressed her cheek against his shoulder so that all he could see was the curve of her head, the gleam of her shorn hair. He stroked one hand down her back, trying to recover from the wildness of his heart and burning past all reason with love for her, the trend of his previous thoughts forgotten.

He was pacing by the driver's side door, taking quick puffs off his cigarette, glancing her way every two seconds as if expecting her to go in without him. As if hoping she would. Standing on the sidewalk not so patiently, Buffy raised her brows at him, mirroring his expectation.

Unfortunately, vamps made a point of avoiding mirrors, which was probably why he half-turned away and ducked his head. She opened her mouth to comment, but then he was pitching the cigarette, squaring his black-leather shoulders, striding with a determined look toward her. He reached the sidewalk, boot lifted, then drew it back and remained standing in the street. Staring in the direction of her house, he took a deep fake breath, let it out. She watched this play-acting with fascination, wondering how aware of it he was.

When he made no move to go further, she rolled her eyes and grabbed his arm. "Come on. No one's going to bite you."

"Oh, ha ha. Very funny, Slayer." He let her lead him up the drive though, arm in arm. His voice had sharpened. "Those guard dogs you call friends weren't exactly sorry to see me go."

"I know," she said. She took her own deep breath, and then the dread she'd been trying to avoid smacked her in the gut. The smell of his leather coat, the feel of him pressed to her side, his strength--they comforted her in a funny way she was relearning, but it wasn't going to help much when she had to present him to her friends. He was a tough sell. "But they." She paused. "Well, they know you like I do," she realized, "and that's not exactly a plus."

He sighed expressively.
"But Dawn will be glad to see you," she said, trying to cheer him up.

Something in his muscles softened, and as they reached the porch she could see that a slight anticipation touched his face. "Missed the Little Bit," he acknowledged. "Yeah. Maybe she'll have a hug for her big bad--" He searched for a word.

"Undead uncle?" Buffy asked dryly. He rolled his eyes at her. "Don't get your hopes up. She's still a teenager. You'll be lucky to get a smile and a grunt."

"You sound all momlike," he observed, and they shared a look; she knew who they were both thinking of, and it was good to pause on the doorstep and remember that Spike had liked her mom, and that her mom, weirdly enough, had liked Spike back. It made taking him inside now slightly less...less of a deal.

And then she looked at the front door. "Oh god," she said as a flutter of panic quickened in her gut again. "Okay. Here we go. Here we are. Going."

"Right," he said, sounding equally unnerved.

She opened the door.

Willow heard the front door open and hastily pulled on her sneaker. Right foot, left sneaker, no, wait. That wasn't right. She kicked it off, let the troublesome issue go for the moment. "Buffy?" she called into the hall. "Xander?"

Buffy appeared in the doorway, smiling, and Willow smiled reflexively in return just before she noticed the nervous look on Buffy's face, just before a tall familiar figure appeared behind her, at her shoulder. Willow's smile dropped away, replaced by astonishment. "Oh oh oh oh oh, my my my my my my.

"'Lo, Red." Spike smirked at her, gaze flicking down her flustered body as if undressing her down to the plain white bra and Thursday panties she'd put on for comfort when changing her clothes. Great Sacred Tits of Hecate, thought Willow as her alarm system went all loopy, and then felt her face flush deeper. Spike just stared at her, lips twisting mockingly as if he could read her every thought.

"Must say you're lookin' good there," he drawled. "Glad to see the lure of the distaff hasn't led you to flannel."

Willow gaped as Buffy jabbed her elbow into Spike's stomach. He grimaced and gave Buffy a sideways squint like a dog accepting reprimand, but he didn't apologize. Of course not. Because he was bad, bad to the bone. Willow felt a hysterical giggle threatening to surface.

"Spike," she squeaked. "It's, uh," shooting a look at Buffy, "not entirely horrible to see you. I guess." If she'd been more sober, she vaguely suspected she'd have been less cool and more angry at his appearance, but Dawn had a horn again and the margaritas weren't quite done with her yet, and now here was Spike, lookin' all lanky leatherboy in Buffy's hallway, back with his diabolical cheekbones. It seemed to be that kind of night, the kind you wished they'd scrapped on the editing
floor but had to live through instead.

"Yeah. Missed you too." Spike flopped down in a chair looking faintly sullen, as if he were thinking of nicotine and other places he could be.

Buffy shifted from foot to foot with excess energy. "Where's Dawn?" she asked.

"Oh, Buffy." Willow winced, and Buffy grew alarmed.

"What?"

"She's got her horn back," Willow said, feeling as if she ought to apologize. "She's crying it off. Well, not literally. Anya's upstairs with her."

Buffy blinked. "Anya's here? Where's Xander?"

"Out looking for you."

"Great. Okay." Buffy sighed. "Well, I guess you know the magic's back."

"Yep," said Willow glumly.

"Anything else wacky happening?" Buffy asked, looking down the hall toward the basement.

"You should avoid the back yard."

"Why?" Buffy asked distinctly, as if she didn't want to know.

"Cause of the big badger," said Willow, drawing her lips in and then pushing them out again in a quirky, bad-news-you-expected smile that wasn't quite.

"How big?"

"Kinda like a boat...and a half. But it's just sleeping." She thought a moment. "And snoring."

"God," Spike said suddenly, looking startled. "I've actually missed this place." That said, he seemed to drop into brooding.

Willow raised a brow, looked to Buffy, and then carefully got up from the couch and went to the kitchen. Buffy followed, as Willow had intended her to. In the kitchen, she turned. "So," she noted with affected calm, "Deadboy. Back in Sunnydale. All hangin' with the Scoobies. What's the up?" She thought the term of disaffection added some swing to her right hook, though she couldn't quite manage the glare of righteousness that Xander would have. The best she could do at the moment was an impertinent squint.

"I know," Buffy said apologetically. "It's heap big strange. Of course," she added dryly, "what isn't these days."

"Buffy." Willow hesitated, wondering if it was just her imagination being all sexy and bad, or if Buffy's mouth really looked kissed. "Are you two back together?"

Buffy's gaze shot up, and the guilt there answered the question.

"Oh, wow. Wow." Willow had to turn away, put her hands on the counter. Which was a flat surface. Which was nice, in the way of flatness. Which her life so did not have anymore. Not since ninth grade. Ninth grade. A very good year, a very good year for a small-town girl and soft
summer nights and no neck bites and a way different scene--

"Will." Buffy touched her arm. "I'm sorry to spring it on you like this. I know it's weird and hard and--"

"Wrong?" said Willow, looking at Buffy's face to see if she was in there, if she had any idea of what she was doing. From the stubborn look she got back, Buffy didn't.

"It's not easy to understand," she began again.

"I understand," Willow interrupted. But she didn't really; saying that just been habit, what she wanted to believe. "No," she admitted, fixing her words. "You're right. I don't understand."

Buffy gave a small smile, but it was polite punctuation and Willow could see her soldiering up. "If I had time--I promise we'll talk, later. But we've got other more important things to worry about now. We went out to the grove; our tree-witch isn't so much tree anymore."

"Well, yeah, I figured," replied Willow sarcastically, annoyed at the assumption that she was a dumbass, which even if she was a bit tipsy, she wasn't.

"We need to figure out what to do," and there it was, the Look, all Buffyish and imploring, the look Willow wanted to believe equaled trust and respect and not just ad hoc desperation.

"Right. I know." So strong was her reflex to the Look, even after so many years and oceans of water under the bridge, that Willow struggled to pull herself together immediately. Time to save the world again, she thought. Her next words came with difficulty and quietness. "I need to, um, sober up," she said. She stole a glance at Buffy, who looked startled but blanketed her reaction with a quick smile and nod.

"I'll make us some coffee."

You do that, thought Willow. And I'll take mine with two sugars and a swirl of bacchus liberatum.

The first thing Xander saw when he came in the door was Willow walking toward him with a cup of coffee in hand, looking more tired than she had when he left, but also more alert. She glanced up and caught his eye.

"I couldn't find Buffy," he said.

"She's, uh, here." Willow made her eyes big and jerked her head in a funny way to one side, toward the living room. Rather than looking over, Xander stared at her.

"You okay?" he asked, tilting his head to one side in friendly mimicry.

"I'm good," she said, punctuating the words with a little puffy-cheeked look of exasperation and wide eyes and more head jerks, as if she might suddenly go all spastic and Violet Beauregarde on him. He watched in wry amusement, the affection he had for her displacing his earlier anger and distracting him, briefly, from worry about magic and missions.
Finally he glanced toward the living room and noticed Buffy standing there, eyeing him in a strange way. "Hey, Buff. Good to see." He tossed his keys in the air, caught them neatly. "I hereby renounce my quest to find the Slayer and retire to quiet contemplation of--" He broke off as Buffy moved aside to reveal Spike sitting in Xander's favorite armchair, sprawled out in his smug and regal way, head tipped to one side, listening to Xander babble and watching him with those ironical, evil-bastard eyes and oh mighty gods of stabby things, Xander thought in prayer, as his jaw snapped shut and anger swept through him. *Spike.*

"What," he said, finger rising to gesture, to gesture, only to gesture, "is that doing here?" His face burned and his head felt like it did after a punch. He'd had bad dreams like this.

"Harris," said Spike, polite and mild as you please, as if they'd spotted each other across some gentleman's club. "You're looking well-fed and--"

"Shut up," he said, finger still pointing like a stake toward the spot where he wished he could bury it. Spike shrugged and looked away, feigning indifference.

"Xander, please." Buffy's voice was hard and she was saying a hundred things with her eyes, none of which Xander was interested in.

"Is that, 'Xander, please get me a pencil so I can pump hot lead into this bodybag that walks like a man,' or is that--"

"Xander!" she said sharply.

Spike was smiling, head tipped even further now, turning his contemplation up at Xander from beneath deeply lidded eyes. Xander had never felt so ready to be Xandy, the Vampire Slayer, than he did at that moment. He could take chip-boy, oh yes he...wait.

"Is he still..." Xander twirled a finger with exaggerated motions next to his head.

"A big electric fan?" asked Buffy sourly, pretending to have no idea what he meant.

"Chipped," he ground out. "Is he still chipped?"

"Yeah, mate. Your beefy neck is safe with me."

Xander's jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed to hardness. "Still not talking to you," he noted curtly.

Spike sighed and got up from the chair, and Xander stiffened, ready to punch him flat for no more reason than violation of air space. But Spike paused just out of strike range and stuck out his hand.

"Look. Not gonna mix it up with you. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones. For her."

It was laughable, in the funny way of evil clowns, and Xander laughed. Spike--wanting to shake--trying to pass himself off as an upstanding, regular guy. He didn't even think about extending his hand back, because that was just silly, and besides, it would have ruined the pleasure of watching Spike stand there until he was forced to give up, toss his hand in the air, and turn away. When he looked at Buffy, though, he could tell she was disappointed, maybe even pissed.

Tough cookies, sister.

"Spike's here to help," she said.

"Oh, right. Here to help. Sure. He just happened to turn up in Sunnydale at the exact moment we
needed him most, to battle injustice in the way that vampires do." How stupid did she think he was?

"Actually," she said, frowning Spike's way briefly before her face erased itself back to that happy oblivion he'd come to hate about her in moments just like this. "That's about right."

He shook his head and turned away. Willow was watching them like television, cradling and sipping her coffee. "Back me up here, Will," he pleaded. "Please tell me we're not rolling out the welcome mat for punk-is-dead again."

"Well," Spike drawled, "I did get offered coffee." He held up a mug, and the smirking went up a notch before he took a mouthful.


"Hey," Willow said, raising her hand, "For the record: just drinking coffee."

Buffy ignored this. "Look." She stared at Xander. "You need to deal, because we can't stand here all night while you do your Clint Eastwood impersonation."

"Fine," he said, holding up his hands. "This is me dealing."

"And you," she said, turning on Spike, who gave her the uplifted eyebrows of who-me. "Don't tick him off."

Xander clucked a derisive laugh. "That's like telling him not to breathe," he said and promptly wished he could skip back five seconds in time and lay down that track differently. "Or...wear leather," he said weakly, while Spike's face took on the lines of a silent jeer. "Forget it." At least he was man enough to give up when he started shooting on an empty quip.

"Okay. Time to plan," said Buffy, moving into the living room.

They were all sagging.

"She seemed pretty defeated, I thought." Tara looked around and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I mean, tree and all." She cradled the coffee in her hands, blew at the steam and took a careful sip. She wished she could have brewed a cup of decaf, but it hadn't seemed right. It would have been forward, and taken time away from the strategy session. At least, her time. They of course would have gone ahead without her. Not that she minded much. It was funny though, after all this time, to still feel on the outside looking in.

She glanced at Spike, who was flicking his lighter open and shut in a concentrated way, eyes fixed on the movement of his own thumb. Xander, across the room, was likewise fixated on it, as if willing telepathy to work.

Dawn shifted so that her shoulder pressed against Tara's leg. "Why can't you give her, like, Dutch elm disease?" she said sulkily. Tara could tell she'd said it just to have something to say; she understood that impulse all too well herself.
"Not a tree anymore, pet." Spike stopped clicking his lighter with a sigh. "Yon witch looks more like Sarah Bernhardt on a bender."

"Who's Sarah Bernhardt?" asked Dawn.

"Someone not important," said Buffy, and Tara felt Dawn's aura flare with the red heat of rage.

"She was an actress," Tara said softly, stroking the younger girl's hair.

"Not important? An actress?" Spike glared at them in that exaggeratedly controlled way he evinced when trying to be civilized and chafing at the restraint. "Only the best bloody actress of all time, and you'd best not forget it. You can take your lot of Melanie Griffiths and Meg Ryans and pasty little Winona Ryders and mash 'em together and you wouldn't have half the talent--"

"Spike!"

"--in the whole sodding, bankrupt excuse for a Guild than you would in The Divine Sarah's left pinkie."

A silence fell, as in the aftermath of a hailstorm. Tara snuck a glance at Buffy's nonplused face and hid a smile. The others were unhappy to have Spike back, but she had a secret sympathy for him that didn't negate wariness, and a soft spot for star-crossed romances that she'd never fully revealed, even to Willow. She knew it was wicked wrong, but watching the lines of energy charging and strengthening between the lovers, she couldn't help but wonder if it might work out between them one day.

Tara looked at Willow, and her inward smile flattened out.

"Okay," said Buffy. "Now that we've settled the question of thespian supremacy--"

"What?" said Willow, jerking to attention and looking around in alarm.

"--we should get back to the question of what to do."

"I still like the idea of a gate-seal spell," Tara spoke up, when no one else said anything right away. She chewed the corner of her lip. "If we can do it without opening her portal any wider than it already is."

Spike snickered and Buffy glared him down. Tara blushed.

"We might try a soulstrike," said Willow. "Or a blackflame cast." She met Tara's eyes as she offered her suggestion. It tugged at her heart, but also instilled unease. Surely Willow wasn't so far gone she had to grasp at straws like this.

"I'm not sure," said Tara, looking at Buffy instead of Willow, "that we should be trying to channel energies not already manifested. Ilwyn's gifts are transformative; if we use the wrong magics against her, she could twist them in ways we can't even anticipate."

"We've tried turning her own powers back on her," said Willow angrily. "And hey, big failure." Guilt fueled that anger; Tara could hear it. But it didn't make listening any easier.

"So what's the book on this Good Witch Glinda?" Spike asked. Everyone turned to look at him. He clocked his gaze around the room, brows rising by increments as no one answered. "The low-down, the Latin. What'd you dig up on her in your library?"
Buffy looked down at her hands, which were twisting together restlessly. "We, uh, didn't find anything. Exactly."

Spike's brows set a new watermark. "What--you're fightin' blind?" Alarm rolled across his face like cloud-shadow across a field as he realized how low they'd sunk. The collective mood in the room was embarrassment, and Tara felt it as strongly as any of them.

"We c-couldn't find her in any of our texts," she said.

"So you called Giles, right?" Spike asked pointedly.

"We called him," said Willow. "But he couldn't find anything either, and he would have flown over if he'd known it was serious, and he had his own stuff to do, so we...fudged."

"We lied," said Xander flatly.

"We've discovered a lot, though," Tara piped up, wanting to wipe the dark, pessimistic look off Spike's face, if only because of how it was affecting everyone else in the room. "We know she's a powerful hedgewitch from a neighboring dimension who's taken on the aspect of the goddess Artemis. Though she has a kind of, um, contemporized incarnation." She frowned. "And a thing for dwarves."

"Oh, well then. If you know her kinks, I'm sure you'll sort her out right quick." Sarcasm etched every line on his face.

"Truth is," said Buffy quietly, "we underestimated her. It was like cartoons and kids' books. Talking trees and singing flowers, leprechauns, people growing rainbow wings and," darting a look at Dawn, "unicorn horns. We didn't take it as seriously as we should have."

"I did," said Anya, who'd been quiet for a while.

"Except for Anya," corrected Buffy.

"Bunnies everywhere," Anya said, obviously traumatized by the memory. "Pink, purple, green. Breeding like rabbits. Hopping into traffic."


"Oh god," said Anya, stricken. Xander slung his arm around her.

"Easy, honey."

"The point is, even when we finally started to see the madness affecting people more seriously, it was kind of..." Buffy hesitated.

"Goofy," said Tara, blushing hard and ducking a glance at Willow, who looked equally mortified at the memory.

Willow cleared her throat. "Like inebriation." She stared downward, voice dropping. "We didn't know about the sacrifices at all until a few weeks ago."

"Maybe it is time to call Giles again," said Buffy. She stood up, paced. Everyone watched her. At her feet, Tara could feel Dawn humming with suppressed energies, so like her sister's it was like being in the room with a tuning fork. "We don't know what we're dealing with, we've failed once,
and...we're not one hundred percent." She carefully didn't look at anyone when she said that.

"Buffy, we can fight her." Willow looked up, a strain of pleading showing through her facade of confidence. "We just have to find the right spell. We have the power."

"It's the right spell part I'm worried about, Will. Tara's right. If we use the wrong mojo, who knows what could happen." A silence fell, and Tara could see Buffy gathering herself to make a decision. She wouldn't have wanted to be in Buffy's place for anything, to have to be the one who called the shots when lives and worlds hung in the balance. "We'll try to close the portal," said Buffy.

"It's such a risk, though." Willow's voice wavered on the uneasy. "If Ilwyn stays here instead of going back--"

"She won't," cut in Tara, quickly shoring up Buffy's decision. "It's the source of her power. Her flow."

"You witches," Spike said. "Always with your flowin' portals." He eyed her with heavy irony and skepticism. "Hope you know what you're on about. You don't want to mess with the White Goddess unless you're damn sure you know your stuff. Even if she is just over-the-counter strength."

Tara glared at him, earning a startled look of respect and interest. "I know what I'm talking about."

"There, there," said Spike, tilting his head at her. "No need to go all daggers on me." His eyes glinted, sly and speculative. "I'm sure your magic wand's got a lot of juice."

"W-w-willow, too," Tara stammered, cheeks blushing as she looked away from him and tried to ground the subject in immediacy. "She's right. We do have the power. I think--I know--we can do this. We can win."

"Good," said Buffy, and drew all their eyes to her with that one word. Resolve shone in her face, firmed her voice. "Because the animated special we've been living in has run way past this girl's bedtime."

The shower was running and his hearing picked up fragments of some off-key song. You light up my life, you give me hope, to carry on.... The little witch's voice was a croak, though, which lent the words an undertone of pathetic misery. He skirted by the bathroom door, wondering if a light tap of his boot-heel would knock open the latch, then turned quickly and put an innocent look on his face as Buffy came out of the Niblet's room.

She closed the door behind her and came to him. The eerie red and green lights filling the night sky outside laid twisted colors on the carpet in the otherwise dark hallway. He drew her into his arms and she leaned against him without hesitation, taking comfort.

This moment alone had been worth coming back to Sunnydale for.

Buffy lowered her voice to a whisper and shifted in his embrace. "God," she said with feeling. "I want to be with you tonight. It's just that with Dawn upset, and getting ready for tomorrow...and to
be honest I don't think we'd get a whole lotta sleep, which would be bad because I haven't slept in," he watched her calculate, "two days." She looked up at him, seeking understanding.

Spike ran his fingertips down her cheekline, and then palmed her face. She leaned into his hand, and the gesture nearly left him mute. "Right," he breathed raggedly. He sought other words, and found none. His throat had locked tight and he was hard as iron; he knew she could feel it. She groaned a little as he tugged her closer. Tempting her wasn't against the rules.

She kissed him hungrily, and he ate her mouth with desperation, began rocking her against his aching member, trying to align her heat to his...just...right. She arched greedily, shoving up onto her tiptoes, sliding up his body. Their tongues wove and thrust, thrust and wove, and her mouth was slippery and wild, and oh bloody blissful fuck, yes, he was going to--

The shower shut off abruptly and Buffy shuddered and pulled back. He inwardly cursed the witch and outwardly displayed his yearning, caressing his love's hair, not quite used to its short tickle but electrified all the same at how it rubbed across his palm. He wanted to bury himself in her, and it was making him frantic. He could see that she felt the same, and that made it pure hell. He imagined her taking him by the hand and leading him into her bedroom, finger pressed to his lips, as she'd done one night upon a time, months back; they'd rutted in her bed, forced to muffled silence. He'd come so hard, riding her into her pink sheets, that he'd actually blacked out.

She was thinking about that night right now; he could see it in her eyes.

The bathroom door interrupted with a waft of steam and girl-smell and Spike moved aside with stiff care to let Willow out. He scowled at her resentfully, despite the twitch of pleasure he took from her perfume, and she scowled back at the sight of them holding hands in the hall.

"Sorry," she muttered, brushing past. "Don't mind me. Just one of the funny human-type persons who pays rent around here. If anyone needs me, I'll be in my room ignoring the debauchery."

Spike watched Willow disappear into her bedroom. "Cranky these days. Might want to up her dosage. Or her wattage." Dismissing her from mind, he stroked his thumb across Buffy's palm. "Where were we."

"We were at the no go, and cutting to the go."

He moved in, owning her space, and played his lips and tongue across one tender little ear. "Come now, love. Too long and the system gets all bollixed up. Got something good for what ails you." He moved her hand between his legs, wrapping it to his resurging need. "Cures hysteria, smooths out the complexion."

She groaned as if bending to his will, but then pushed him away. "Nice try."

He tipped her a wicked smile. "You know all's I need is five minutes with you and I'll do you so good you'll sleep for a week."

Her lips parted, and she swallowed, speechless. "I, oh...t-taffy," she stuttered nonsensically at last in a breathless, little-girl voice.

"Buffy, do you have any clean tow--oh, sorry." Tara wrapped her arms around the handful of bedding she carried. "I'll, um."

"No," said Buffy, sliding her hand from his, "I was just going to bed. To sleep." A pointed look at him: "Alone."
"Good night," Tara said as Buffy went into her room, then gulped when Spike turned a baleful glower her way. "Sorry," she murmured, lips twitching weakly around a smile.

He glanced at the bedding she held. "Piece of advice, doll. Hide, don't find, the extra blankies; 'cause then you have to share."

Satan finds some mischief still for idle tongues to do, he thought with satisfaction as he swept by. But the advice was true enough; she'd be smart to take it—not that she would, not like anyone ever listened to him, though he'd been damn generous doling out his wisdom under the circumstances, seeing as how she'd scragged his chance of a Buffy boff and ensured him a night of solitary on the Summers couch.

Just went to show the kind of fellow he was, really. Always thinking of others.

Smell of griddling batter, sound of girlish laughter and clinking and sizzling and then a very loud clattering crash, as if something had been tossed into a sink by a young kid who had no respect for the sleep of the living dead.

Spike drew the blanket off his face and winced at the sunlight coming in through a gap in the curtains. Cursing, he rolled off the couch onto the floor with a thud.

Finding himself nose to nose with a piece of popcorn lodged in a carpet not too recently vacuumed, Spike turned his head tiredly to one side, laid his cheek on the floor and idly began counting the glossy magazines lodged under the couch.

Tara looked up as Spike entered the kitchen, head bent over a copy of *Marie Claire*. His feet carried him automatically to the middle of the room where he stopped, not lifting his gaze from the page.

"Are you reading the article on Mormons in the sex industry?" asked Tara, recognizing the issue as one she'd read a few months back. "'Cause I couldn't put that down either."

"Nah, something about easily orgasmic women. Here," he laughed incredulously, "Now this is a load of--'Carrie was one of these easily aroused women,' says, and then they quote the bint, 'I can't think of a place on my body I'm not orgasmic. I can walk out naked in the rain and get myself off from the drops hitting my skin.'" Spike uttered a shorter, dryer laugh as he looked up from the page to Tara. "Can you just imagine this giant--" He caught sight of Dawn at the stove and broke off. "Er, yeah. Never mind that then." He tossed the magazine on the counter.

"I am an adult now," said Dawn, looking down her nose at Spike as she scraped a spatula under her pancakes. Her horn had grown a few more inches, and she moved her head as if trying to
compensate for its drag. "And, by the way? That's my magazine."

"Oh, adult now?" said Spike. "Must not have noticed. You'll be wanting some vodka with your flapjacks then, I reckon."

Tara grinned.

"Don't suppose there's any blood to be had here in Pleasantville?" Spike griped, going to open the fridge.

"Just the stuff we have running through our juicy veins," said Dawn, as she dropped pancakes onto her plate. "Hot from the tap. Dollar pitchers, Friday mornings only."

Hand still on the open refrigerator door, Spike swiveled his head like a raven to stare at her, and Tara's mouth fell open slightly. Dawn, as if noticing the quality of silence, turned to find them gaping. "What? I can't be the witty sister?"

"Apparently not," said Spike in a disturbed voice, before visibly shaking it off. He banged the fridge shut. "Not even a bloody V8," he muttered. He wandered to the back door, stared out. "That badger's got to have thirty, forty liters easy," he said. "Here." He turned to Tara. "Why don't you run out and borrow a cuppa?"

"Okay, sure, I'll just stick a baster in his paw and hoover it right up for you." That was sarcasm, thought Tara proudly, and wistfully regretted that Willow hadn't been up to hear it.

"Don't you have a spell for sleepin' badger?" asked Spike.

"Well, maybe." Tara got up and joined him at the door, taking the request more seriously. "He's pretty sleepy already though."

"Lucky for us." Spike stared with her through the glass. There was a brief silence. "You suppose there's a pot of gold at the end of that rainbow?"

Tara considered, then glanced up to meet his eyes. "Well, last time there was just jello."

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They were sitting around the dining room table when Xander and Anya came in. Xander was carrying doughnuts, and the bright pink box meant Henry's, which were the best. Dawn's spirits leaped. Her pancakes had sucked.

"Did you get sprinkles?" she asked eagerly as Xander set the box on the table. She tore open the flap as he and Anya took seats.

"There be sprinkles, there be jelly, and there be rings of chocolatey goodness."

"Your favorite, eh?" said Spike slyly. He was sprawled back in his chair, black tee-shirt showing off his muscles, fingers loosely wrapped his mug of badger blood. He had his super-cool-vamp-vibe going and it made Dawn feel kinda twitchy, in the good way. I may be easily orgasmic, she thought, picking sprinkles off her doughnut and letting them melt on her tongue. She knew Spike was supposed to be evil, but he'd looked after her a bunch of times and been pitched off a tower for
trying to save her back when she was all keyed up, and plus, he and her slayer-sister were shagging like minks—so how bad could he be?

"An, why don't you open the window." Xander quirked an unfriendly smile down the table. "Let a little more light in here."

"Shouldn't you be turnin' into a ghost or somethin' about now?" asked Spike in bland tones, cocking his head.

"I've given that up." Xander smiled again tightly. "But I'll be glad to put in a good word if they're looking for someone to fill the position."

Dawn rolled her eyes at the scrapping. She didn't even get half their digs at each other; they pretended they had some mortal feud going, as if Xander was Batman and Spike had killed his parents, when she happened to know from overhearing Buffy talk to Willow that the two guys used to hang out and watch Bond flicks in Xander's basement way back when. And now they bickered about doughnuts. It was so lame.

Buffy swept in looking like Queen for a Day. As she did every day. Dawn tuned out the boring war talk and touched a finger to her horn, worrying the tender skin at its base. It was like a zit, a big stupid zit. The others seemed to have stopped even noticing it, but that didn't mean much because when you took a head count, they were basically all freaks. Witch, vampire, witch, slayer, ex-demon, Xander. She stole a look at Xander. She'd had such a crush on him when she was little, but he looked like an adult now, the real kind, not someone who'd just graduated from high school a few years back. Sooner or later he'd start making little babies and then it'd be all downhill.

She sometimes wondered what it would be like to be a vampire, and sometimes thought it would be the bomb; living forever and never getting old and having super-strength. Whenever she bit the inside of her cheek by accident, or worried her lip until it was sore, she'd taste her own blood and imagine herself all fanged-up and drinking down big Super Gulp-sized bottles of other people's heme every day. Or living off rat and badger and cow blood, like Spike. Ewww. No. And if she were a vampire would doughnuts taste the same as they did now? Chewing hers thoughtfully, Dawn tried to memorize the flavor. And what about bacon and gummy bears and milkshakes and cheesy popcorn and even fresh lettuce, when you slathered it all up with ranch dressing?

She looked up and saw Spike bite off the end of a cruller with gusto, while staring at Xander. If I were a vamp, I'd eat doughnuts too, thought Dawn.

Finishing hers, she wondered if there were any daisies left in the yard.

"So, it's a plan then," said Buffy, looking over her motley, half-caffeinated, doughnut-munching crew and wondering if they'd heard a word she said. "We'll get all the stuff we need together, head up to the woods, and hit her at sunset for the uh, whatsis--"

"The confluence of dark and light," said Tara. "When the world is balanced between the advent of shadow and the forces of sun, and the portal of the dimensional multiverse can flow in either direction."
"Right," said Buffy, into the silence that followed.

"It's a plan," murmured Willow, resting her cheek on one hand and huddling over her coffee in an unenthused way. "Yay plan."

It was, Buffy thought, going to be a very long day.

There isn't much to see when you have a blanket draped over your head, but if Spike peeked just a bit around the edges, he could see the white sky flickering behind the trees as they drove, and tiny shafts of reddish-gold sunlight through the bare branches, too small and quick to affect him, too low in the sky. Glinda, or Ilwyn, or whatever her name was, had apparently decided to winterize the trees along the west hill leading up to Breaker's Woods. On the east side, they loomed disproportionately tall, and had grown faces.

"How long till sunset?" Buffy asked from the front seat, speaking to no one in particular.

"Fifteen minutes," said Xander.

Spike eyed the back of his shaggy head resentfully. "Hey," he said, loudly enough to be heard over the witches' wittering. "Ever hear of second gear?"

"First, we don't have enough incline, and second, bite me."

"You wish," Spike muttered. "Oi," he added sharply, aiming a hooded scowl next to him, "Watch the horn there, pet. You could stake someone good with that thing."

"Sorry," Dawn said, leaning back. "I was trying to see how close we were."

"It doesn't matter, because you're not getting out of the car," said Buffy over her shoulder.

"I know that," Dawn said in a low voice, through gritted teeth.

Spike considered her downcast profile for a moment, then flicked his gaze up along her silvery, spiraled horn. "The antler's filling out shapely there," he observed. "Very symmetrical."

"You don't have to be nice," Dawn grinched. "It's ugly and stupid." She sounded close to tears. Hormonal little beast.

"But, unicorn. Can't mistake that," he said. "Got that glow to it."

Willow leaned over the seat, adding in her efforts to cheer her up. "And remember, Dawnie, it represents the pure of heart." She spoke brightly as if this made having a great sodding horn in the middle of your mug a good thing.

"It represents virgins," Dawn shot back, not turning her head.

"It represents death," said Spike, and earned a sudden, grudging look of interest from the little bit and a gaze of outrage from the witch.
"It does not!" said Willow.

"Read your literature," he said irritably. "Hell, read your Bible. Not that you've likely got one."

"Hey," said Willow hotly, "Just because I'm Jewish...oh, uh, wait. You, uh, probably meant the whole witch thing--but hey, look who's talking. Let he who is without vamp cast the first stone."

Ignoring her, Spike said to Dawn, "Unicorn represents death, resurrection, and a mighty horn stabbing through the entrails of the unjust. You might as well cast the thing in sizzling neon and hang your own slayer shingle from it."

The younger Summers was clearly wowed, sulk forgotten, but no one else seemed too pleased with him.

"Spike," said Buffy, giving him the hairy eyeball of a protective big sis. He sighed.

"Not that you should do any such thing, of course," he added to Dawn, mealy-mouthing his obedience to Buffy's unspoken command. He hunched back into his blanket and shifted away from the kid, hoping to avoid any more opportunities to catch the wrath of Power Puff. Why he ever opened his gob around this lot was an eternal mystery.

Spike slumped doorward until the sun dipped low enough, then in relief let the blanket fall from his shoulders. The smell of mildewed wool stirred unwelcome memories of humiliation, of days past--days!--when he'd been so desperate and lonely he'd light out across town to Buffy at the drop of a hat, making himself unwelcome. One beckoning finger curl and he'd have been on his belly for her, a grateful dog.

Come to think...not much had changed there.

He straightened his shoulders and felt by restless habit for his fags. It was his car, but he supposed they'd all pitch a fit if he lit one. He wondered if their half-cocked, hare-brained plan had any chance in hell of succeeding. Well, no matter. He'd fight the good fight, by Buffy's side, and if he ended up dust, maybe she'd put him on her mantel.

The sky had gradually been darkening to red and pink, and a flame-winged dragon flew into sight against its backdrop, gracefully riding the air currents above the bare tree tops. Spike felt wonderment touch him and watched without speaking until it disappeared. When he broke his enraptured gaze inward, mouth opening to remark on the apparition, he discovered the others squabbling about weaponry. He smiled to himself, strangely moved by their familiarity and his own glimpse of grace, and said nothing.

"Okay, huddle time." Buffy slammed the door shut and shouldered her weapons bag. The others collected around her, all but Dawn, who sat inside the SUV with arms folded across her chest, ostentatiously not looking Buffy's way.

"We'll hit hard and fast," Buffy said, taking a moment to meet each of their eyes as she spoke. "I'll go in first with Xander and Anya, Spike will flank, and while we distract them, Tara and Willow will cast the spell."
"Quick reminder." Xander held up a finger. "If a dwarf bites your ankle, remember to punt."

"Damn," complained Anya, looking down at her thin, white sneakers. "I knew I should have worn my boots. Dwarves' hands are always so grubby, and these shoes are brand new."

"Everyone ready?" Buffy asked, putting some steel into her voice and successfully recapturing the attention of Anya, who nodded. Everyone else followed suit. Xander held his sword point down but with a firm grip, looking steady and strong, Willow and Tara grasped their spell bags and stood shoulder to shoulder with a resolve that wasn't quite as convincing but would have to do, and Spike, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, swung his crossbow up to rest against his shoulder and sketched her a salute.

Satisfied that this was as good as it was going to get, Buffy turned and spoke to Dawn through the open window. "Stay here. Don't come into the woods, and if you have to leave, leave." She held out her hand and felt Xander drop the keys in. She handed them to Dawn, who took them with ill grace and no words.

Then Buffy turned and led the way down toward the grove. Here's the part where I play the superhero, she thought, trying not to get distracted by the ick factor as spotted red-capped mushrooms crumbled heavily aside where she strode. The glow from the trees intensified as they approached, pink and blue clouds of mist rolling out along the ground. Music filtered out too, what sounded like Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" as rendered on pan pipes but really couldn't be, because that would be too surreal, even for Glinda.

A naked man with green skin and a donkey's head sprinted by, chasing a furry blue woman with antenna in a Laura Ashley sundress.

Okay, then again.

Buffy looked over her right shoulder and gestured for Spike to flank. He slipped off between the trees, a stealthy shadow which blurred into a flicker only slayer eyes could track before disappearing entirely.

"Man, this is one whacked wood," Xander whispered. He was looking carefully around him as he walked, as if trying to expect anything from any direction.

They crept up on the clearing, and Buffy directed Xander and Anya to position themselves further out along its rim. Setting her bag down, she pulled it open and pulled out a short sword. "This is it. Do your stuff," she said quietly to Willow and Tara, then left them huddled together by a shrub, beginning their soft chants, as she stepped forward into the light.

Almost immediately she felt dizziness roll across her as the hedgewitch's perfumes tried to work their magic. "Really nice Glade Fresh Scent you've got here," she said. "You could market that."
Ilwyn looked up, beaming. "Buffy!" she cried, clapping her hands together. "You came. I knew you would." Her low, rich voice poured into Buffy's ears, and Buffy felt a surge of happiness at the welcome which she shook off impatiently. Don't cloud the issue, bitch, she thought. Her fist firmed around her sword hilt.

"Save the good cheer, Sister Mary Malice. I'm here to take you down." Why do I say these things, Buffy wondered.

"Oh, Slayer." Ilwyn smiled and walked forward with outstretched arms, scattering dwarves as she moved. "You are the most endearing, enchanting warrior I've ever come across."

Buffy ducked her head and blushed pink at the compliment. It struck her that she'd really been kind of harsh on the witch, and she felt a small, reluctant smile break out over her face. "I, uh, no one ever really tells me that. Well, sometimes Spike, but he doesn't say 'endearing', it's more like, 'you're a vicious little fury, aren't you' and then he tears off my...wait." Buffy groaned. "Xander," she yelled frantically. "Anyah! Guys, help, I need some help!" She held up her sword wardingly, putting it between her and Ilwyn.

In her peripheral vision she could see Xander and Anya charging out of the trees, Anya making a beeline for bunnies and whacking them with her battle-axe, Xander skewering into clusters of dwarves whose companions rounded on him with angry cries. Around each of them a bloody swathe grew, accompanied by the heart-rending sobbing of small pixies and beautiful elf girls. It was like a Monty Python wedding massacre, and Buffy--finding herself a spectator despite her best intentions--felt slightly sick.

"Oh dear," said Ilwyn, turning with one hand raised to her breast. "Oh, how cruel."

Xander helplessly lowered his sword as a sylph threw herself prostrate at his feet, weeping and pleading for mercy. He raised a look to Buffy that clearly asked what the hell he was supposed to do, and at that moment a troll strolled out of the woods behind him and bonked him on the head. Xander crumpled to the ground, not actually unconscious but stunned to a feeble heap.

On the other side of the grove, Anya was surrounded by bunnies who were making little feints and circling her in furry dashes. She had dropped her axe and was shrieking hysterically. Ilwyn turned and flicked her wrist, and Anya promptly turned into a deer, rolled wide eyes in panic, and bounded off.

Ilwyn turned to Buffy again and smiled. "Would you like some tea?" she asked.

Tea sounded good.

"No!" said Buffy in frustration. She shook her head sharply to clear it, and then glared at the witch. Damn her! Damn her blandness and tea-offering! She stamped her foot and raised her sword. "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!" She immediately winced. Oh for the love of.... Still, she thought, she had always wanted to shout that just before going into battle.

"Darling, you look tired." Ilwyn moved forward and took her arm. "Why don't you come rest?"

Buffy, feeling tired, yes, that was exactly it, let herself be drawn along a few feet. "That's really nice of you," she said. The warmth of their special friendship enclosed the two of them, and Buffy smiled up at the woman. "You're so nice," she said, and then giggled. For no good reason. Then, dredging up focus from an inner swill of distraction, she brought up her sword and shoved it at the creature's filmy skirts. The blade skidded off in a sad way, and Buffy pouted. "Drat."
"Spirits of nature and of weather, fold this tattered quilt together / crazy-quilt be our unmaking / return this place to its unbreaking--"

"Oh, pretty," said Buffy, as her friends entered the clearing, floating hand-in-hand above the ground. "Hi, Willow!" She waved. "Tara! Hey!" Holding hands--they'd gotten back together! It was such a happy day Buffy wanted to cry.

Next to her, Ilwyn snarled and stretched out her fingers, and a flash of light rose up around the edge of the grove--but she hadn't spelled anything yet, had she, Buffy wondered. It must be her friends. They were so clever. There was more light, pretty light, and a big wind that blew Buffy down, and when she got up again--

"Willow!" she cried, looking desperately for her sword. Head clear, she grabbed her weapon and swung it around on her enemy. The White Witch wasn't looking quite so shiny-white any more; her dark hair blew around her like sea waves and her eyes were black. Across the grove, Willow and Tara were still chanting, but Buffy couldn't hear their words above the roar of the portal, whose fissure ripped the ground.

Her attack on Ilwyn was being parried by magical thrusts of empty air, so that her blade went skating away on nothingness. Still, if she just kept fighting, she might get a blow in, and so she did, as the chanting rose toward a crescendo and then, "Ha!" she cried as the sword point went in...and paused a millimeter away from Ilwyn's vulnerable stomach. Buffy tried to pull the sword out but it was held fast, and then as a sheet of blue light swept up the sword she tried frantically tried to let go of it, but the light was too fast and her arm was immobile and then the rest of her too, and there she was, encased in some witchy aura, frozen with her arm out like a tin soldier, unable to do anything but watch in horror as Her Sugar-Coated Badness turned her friends into animals.

The wind died down, its roar subsiding, and Ilwyn smiled benevolently on the bear that had been Willow and the cat that had been Tara. Tara-Cat meowed piteously and scampered out of the grove, while the Willow-Bear roared in a somehow mournful way, dropped to all fours, and followed at a slower pace.

Abandonment, thought Buffy. Always, in the end, I wind up alone. Her gaze flicked sideways, attracted by the movements of still-human Xander, who was struggling to sit up. Relief sprung in her heart. At least I have--

A poof of fairy dust exploded, and left a beaver.

--good old Xander. Bye-bye, Xander, she thought, as the beaver wandered off.

Ilwyn sighed and touched her hair, as if fearing the disarray of her flowers. Behind her the fissure was lay open and visible, a starburst-shaped pit cracking through the green grass and petals. "I really do have issues with rude people," she admitted to Buffy. "Now if you'd come, petitioned nicely, had some tea...I'd have laughed of course, and made you my minions. But it would have been so much more delightful."

She looked directly into Buffy's eyes and smiled, then stroked her hands down Buffy's cheeks. Buffy gasped as the blue light encasing her turned golden, and felt her sword taken from her hand to be cast aside. She still couldn't move on her own, but the binding was softer now and she could speak.

"Your brand of niceness isn't so nice," Buffy said, cold with anger and a deeper layer of fear. "I for one could live happily without seeing your smarmy face again."
"Oh, happily? I think not. You are a deeply unhappy soul." Ilwyn touched her face. "And yours is a deeply unhappy world. I put a rainbow over your existence, but you prefer mud. I thought your people could be elevated, but I do begin to wonder." The witch smiled as if with sadness, but her eyes remained jet-black. "I make colors brighter, music gayer, I bring life to the lifeless. And how do you thank me? With childish sorcery and cold hearts."

"I've heard your happy-happy joy-joy commercials before, and you know what? I don't buy what you're selling."

Over Ilwyn's shoulder, Buffy saw Spike appear out of the forest, crossbow up and aimed. She averted her eyes from him hastily, refocusing her attention on her adversary. "In fact, you know what I think? I think you're a passive-aggressive bitch who could benefit from therapy, and okay, now that I think again, you're not so passive, but this whole Fairy Queen Goodness shtick needs a lot of work, a lot of work, you could maybe sell cream cakes with it, but not evil," and why the hell wasn't Spike shooting?

"Buffy," Ilwyn said, face softening. "There's no need to be unkind. You could be such a sweet girl. You'd catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, you know. And really, vampire, you don't want to do that."

Ilwyn turned as the crossbow loosed its arrow and diverted it with a gesture of her hand. Spike flung himself aside, ducking and rolling and coming up again in a flash while her fingers streamed light, but the light followed him and he was seized, and that simply it was over. Buffy closed her eyes, and opened them again expecting to see a bat or maybe a snake, but Spike was standing there being himself, trapped in amber and looking eloquently annoyed.

"Sorry, Slayer."

"Don't sweat it," Buffy said quietly, because, after all, going out cool was one of the few options she had left about now. Ilwyn gazed between them, smiling, then moseyed closer to Spike in a way that made Buffy even more tense and wary than imminent death had. "What's your name, valiant one?" she asked.

Spike flicked a glance up and down the hedgewitch, snorted in dismissal, then yelped as he was gripped in a way that men shouldn't be. Buffy winced.

"Ow! Ow! Bloody ow! You fucking bitch. Let go!" She merely ground her hand further, and he shouted loudly, then swore. "Spike, Spike! What the fuck do I care, put it on a name-tag if you want, you shatterbrained slag!" He groaned feelingly as he was released.

"Oh, my, really?" Ilwyn's smile deepened and she twinkled at Buffy. "The vampire is your Spike?" Laughter trilled. "Dear, you are drawn to the bad side of the tracks."

"Here," Spike said, directing a surprised and somewhat pissed-off look Buffy's way. "What did you tell her about me?"

Buffy, trying to flex out of her wrappy straitjacket, didn't answer, but watched fiercely as Ilwyn swept one hand across Spike's face. He promptly vamped out and snapped his fangs at her, but sadly missed, and the witch continued her assessment of his aura, or whatever the hell she was doing.

"Not quite yourself, I see. Poor creature."

"Oh, I'm me," said Spike, smiling nastily at her, demonic brows furrowed. "You can bet on it." He
struggled just as Buffy did, but more visibly and with a savagery that looked as if it might exhaust him fast.

"Easy, now." Ilwyn touched his chest and suddenly Spike went very still, staring at her. "Yes," she said. "Feel that?"

"What--" Spike devamped. His naked face held an expression of astonishment, a tremulously balanced edge of wonder. "What are--" A flash of something hit him, and the agony in his eyes made Buffy struggle harder to free herself, to get to him.

"Oh god," he said.

Buffy went abruptly still at the tone of his voice, hairs rising on the back of her neck.

"Oh my dear god." He was staring vacantly into thin air, lips slightly parted, as if seeing...it was impossible for her to know. "My Lord in Heaven," he whispered, with stricken fear. And something else passed across his face as she watched, some terrible shadow of anguish, and he sobbed once, a sound breaking the silence like a bubble of air surfacing in a pool, rising from somewhere so deep that it made her own chest ache. She couldn't see what he saw, but she knew its grief.

"Leave him al--" Buffy began to cry out, but the words became stoppered up in her throat as she was enspelled again, and she could only watch now.

"That hurts, doesn't it," said Ilwyn gently to Spike. She smiled, touching him a moment more, then let her fingers drop.

Spike gasped as if he'd been released and stared at the witch, his face wet with tears. Buffy felt her heart pounding wildly in her chest, so hard she thought it might be enough to break through her paralysis.

"You cow-cunted, rot-bellied, useless piece of poxied gash," Spike whispered, staring white-faced at Ilwyn, tears still slipping unnoticed down his face. His face worked as if he were trying not to show anything, say anything more, cry any harder.

"So not nice," said the witch. "And so undeserved. Does the kiss of your own soul not move you?"

Buffy gasped and felt tears spill from her own eyes, helpless against them.

"Oh, it moves me," Spike ground out, his voice so low Buffy could barely make out his words. "Moves me to kill you." But he didn't move; couldn't.

"I'm afraid the slayer is a lost cause," Ilwyn said. "You, though. You could be nicer. So much nicer." She smiled kindly, even playfully. "Would you like to be?"

"Sod off, fuck off, fuck yourself, crawl back down your hole and die," Spike said, each curse spoken in a level, distinct tone, as instructions. He swallowed and flinched as Ilwyn stroked his wet cheek.

"Now, now," she said. "Let's follow the storyline." She paused, fingered her hair with a sudden flush of modesty. "I am a writer, you know. Children's books, mostly, but with an occasional dabble in the science-fiction and fantasy market." She waved a hand, as if waving the digression away. "In all my stories, though, I like to let characters choose their own endings. So I will grant your choice, one of three wishes--"
"You've heard my wishes. Take your pick." Spike's face was stone, his eyes glinting icily.

"--one of three gifts," Ilwyn self-corrected, tapping the air just in front of his chest and reducing him to silence. "Of my choosing. And you must take one." Her smile didn't quite reach her black eyes. "I insist. Your first choice, vampire--the gift of a soul."

Buffy's heart skipped a beat, and Spike's gaze fixed itself to hers. They looked at each other, speaking without speaking as Ilwyn went on.

"The second, I take this bad, naughty little button from your head."

Spike's lips parted and his gaze swung back to Ilwyn. Buffy's heart cried out no, but she could see the utter fascination with which he now looked at the witch, and the uncertainty.

"Or, third." She smiled. "Your death."

"Not fond of that last one," Spike said. He tilted his head; his tears had dried and his face was wiped of all expression but guarded curiosity. "And why do I reckon this game is rigged?" he added softly.

"The first two gifts require a sacrifice," said Ilwyn. "The last, the easiest, does not."

"Sacrifice. Bugger me," Spike said conversationally. He didn't even look at Buffy. "No deal."

"Is your resolve so strong?" The witch touched his chest again, and Spike cried out, his eyes widening, then closing as his expression was transformed by ecstasy, by terror. After a few moments she released him. "Feel that," she said, lifting her hand to his head. "And now feel this." And Spike vamped out, snarling, eyes glowing with self-possession and rage, lips curving up in a horrible smile.

"Yeah," he said. "Now that's more like it, ducks." He rolled his shoulders once, then tipped his head back and forth as if he were testing a sudden freedom of movement within his own skull. "Hell," he said with relish. "Missed that. Didn't even know I was missing anything till now. Like bein' all cramped up, 'fraid to even think for the pain."

"Terrible, isn't it, that self-control? Like a seed taking root and binding you, tendrils searching through the rocky ground of your memories, digging down deep into the places you call morality and conscience, spots in the earth you thought were dead but are now feeding the growth, like a malignant tumor in your brain."

"Yeah," Spike breathed in rapture, then licked his lips with rude appreciation. "You're a bit of all right, aren't you, sweetheart? Don't know why I was so--"

She released him, and the demon dropped from his face, leaving the semblance of humanity and a look of shock.

Buffy's fists clenched slowly, as if against cold molasses. If she could punch a hole in this shell, if she could just.

Punch.

"No," Spike was saying to himself. "No." He shuddered, closed his eyes. His chest heaved with the ghost of breath; his muscles were tight with strain.

"Now my preference," said Ilwyn in her light, musing voice, "is to see that nice boy you've got
buried inside come out and play. I do think he'd know how to be polite to a lady." She tipped her head, considering him. "But I'm willing also to let your dark spirit run free, be true to itself. After all, nothing in nature is unnatural. Except, perhaps, what you are now." She smiled pityingly. "A caged beast with a thorn in its paw, a lost soul trapped betwixt and between."

"You certainly can spout the gibberish," said Spike, opening his eyes to stare at her. "Ever get tired of listenin' to yourself?"

"Not yet," she laughed. She moved to Buffy's side, touched her bound body. Buffy felt the gold air around her begin to thicken and change color again, until she was viewing the world through a blue prism, and then it deepened further and her breath began to hitch as the air thinned.

"Choose," she heard Ilwyn say. "Of the first two gifts, her sacrifice will bring you your pleasure."

Buffy stared at Spike, who stared back. She could see everything in his eyes that he was feeling and thinking, she could hear him inside: his soul speaking like the recorded voice of the dead on a strip of magnetic tape, his demon laughing at her. Voices bound, snarled together; of two beings locked in eternal struggle.

"I choose death," Spike said simply, speaking right through to her, and not to Ilwyn. His voice was rueful but calm, as if there had been no struggle at all, no other choices. His eyes said good-bye.

He looked away from Buffy to Ilwyn, gaze sharpening with cynicism. "And that's my death, by the way, you tricky bint. Now let her go."

"Oh, my," mocked Ilwyn lightly. "As if that was part of the deal. You really must--oh, little darling girl! Do come in."

Buffy gasped for air in horror and strained with renewed force at her prison as Dawn stepped into the grove. Her sister's face was furious, and tears streaked her cheeks.

"Dawn, get the hell out of here," said Spike roughly. "Run!"

But Ilwyn wasbeckoning, and Dawn was stepping forward, face softening to calm and a look of wide-eyed fascination.

"Aren't you a jewel," cooed Ilwyn in a motherly way. "A radiant pearl."

Dawn took her hand and smiled, and then fell forward, plunging the horn she wore into Ilwyn's chest. Buffy cried out and realized she'd done so as the aura released her. She rushed to Dawn, who'd crumpled on top of the witch's body, horn lodged between her ribs. She was crying and Ilwyn was weakly pressing at Dawn's head, fingers tangling in her hair as she tried to free herself.

Spike joined Buffy and carefully helped eased Dawn back, but their combined strength snapped the horn clean off her forehead and Dawn screamed as the growth detached itself, leaving a raw bloodied wound in the skin. She passed out at once, and Buffy drew her off, laying her gently on the ground and checking the wound. It was not bleeding as much as it should have for a head wound, and once assured of this, she turned back, only to find that Spike had dragged the witch to the edge of the portal. Buffy joined him there and took a shared grasp of the woman, feeling a great and benevolent readiness to pitch her back into the Disneyfied hell from whence she came.

Ilwyn opened her eyes and looked up at Spike, eyes half-focused. Her hand clutched his coat sleeve. "I would never have written this," she said, gasping softly at the cost of words. "The horn of a unicorn. How...how poetic, actually, how meaningful. What a lovely death."
Around them, a fringe of woodland creatures and fairies and elves were creeping up. Buffy glanced at them, but they showed no signs of menace, only a deep sadness. They all carried garlands of flowers. She rolled her eyes.

"You are a foolish creature," Ilwyn murmured to Spike as if bestowing a blessing. "But a good character."

"Yeah, whatever," he said, terse with indifference. "Hurry up and die, will you?" Not indifferent, revised Buffy, at the tone of low, intense hatred in his request.

"What, will you take no parting gift?" whispered Ilwyn, eyes bathing him with light, smile tipping up her gentle lips. "You have, after all, your sacrifice."

Spike froze, and then looked to Buffy. The planes of his face were hard, soft, hard, in flux with decision and indecision and his eyes begged or spoke and she didn't know now what they said or what she should say back.

"Whatever you choose," she said, "I'll understand."

He looked down at the witch, while flowers fluttered down around them, and the pause of his hesitation felt like a blow.

"I choose this," he finally ground out. He stared at the witch, face hardening over with contempt. "You can keep your bloody gifts." And he shoved her over the edge, out of Buffy's hands, and a hail of flower petals fell in after her and the ground began to shake and Buffy stood at the same moment Spike did. They instinctively clung to each other to keep upright and then stumbled off as the fissure in the earth began to slowly close, like a wound healing itself. Into its shrinking gap jumped wave after wave of furry animals and weeping fairies, like a mass suicide of children's television.

Buffy watched until the ground closed with an audible pop, then shook herself free of the daze from that sight.

"Like watching Muppets drink the Kool-Aid," said Spike, staring at the scarred earth with an equally disturbed frown.

She stared up at him, and he turned to stare down. She wanted to slap him, hard. She wanted to beat the hell out of him, literally. And, oh god--

Buffy drew him down for a gentle kiss, a brief brush of lips, then released him. He gazed at her and she saw that he was touched, slightly broken, disbelieving of her good graces. "What's that for?" he asked in a low, rough voice.

"What do you think?"

His face shifted almost imperceptibly, the way a man's does when he feels regret. An amazing simulation was what it could have been, what anyone with sense would have pegged it as. She knew it wasn't.

"I made the wrong choice for you, love." He didn't touch her; he was close enough to kiss again but he projected great distance, as if he were stranded high up on some rocky place, looking on her from afar.

"No. I mean. Yes. But...."
Across the grove, Dawn stirred with a groan, and Buffy's head turned instinctively. "Later," she said to Spike. "We'll talk later." She started to move away, but he grabbed her arm. Surprised, she looked at him.

"Don't tell the others," he said to her, gaze boring into hers, commanding. "Don't tell them, Slayer."

"No," she promised quietly, searching his eyes a moment more. "I won't."

"Well, that was special," said Xander, coming to and finding himself flat on his back, staring up at the trees above him. "Almost, dare I say, too special."

It was day again; it was night again.

"Hey," Buffy asked. "How you doin'?"

The shallow lamp light cast shadows across the bed and Buffy sat down next to Dawn, who was reading a tattered paperback. When Dawn said nothing and didn't raise her eyes from the page, Buffy plucked the book away and looked it over. It was one of their mom's old potboiler romances, the cover displaying a lot of flesh. A bodice-straining bimbo, clutched in the arms of a bare-chested man, seemed to have been caught mid-orgasm by the painter's imagination.

"Mighty swarthy," said Buffy of the man.

"That's Pierce Renfield," said Dawn. "The strapping plantation owner with a secret past. I think it has something to do with brothels. I haven't gotten that far yet."

"Oh. My." Buffy raised her brows. "Gotta respect the trashiness of that. She idly traced the embossed cover, then handed the book back. Glancing up at Dawn's face, she saw her sister watching her warily. Her very clear forehead was marred only by a light scrunch of annoyance or maybe concern. Twenty-four hours and smooth as eggshell. This time there'd been an upside to magic, and no visits to the emergency room, for which Buffy was deeply thankful.

"I just wanted to say good-night," said Buffy. "I'm going out for a while. But Willow's here."

"Yeah. Funny, isn't it. Almost like she lives here."

"You know, and I say this with perfect objectivity, I was never such a brat at your age."

"Next week I'm going to be a goth," rejoined Dawn coolly, staring her down, "a big fat goth, and I'll dye my hair black and get my nose pierced."

"Point taken," Buffy said, surrendering with a wry smile. "You're an angel." She reached out to
stroke Dawn's hair briefly, then got up. "Don't stay up too late."

"Don't go have sex with vampires," said Dawn, absorbed in her book again and not bothering to look up.

Buffy paused at the door. "If you're still up at breakfast, there are some waffles in the freezer."

She closed the door behind her and released a small whoosh of breath. "Oh, yeah. I am she of the sucky sisterhood," she muttered to herself as she walked down the hall. "Dysfunction, thy name is Buffy." She descended the stairs and found Willow in the living room, reclining on the couch and watching Leno in a not-really-watching way.

"Hey," said Willow, glancing up at Buffy before returning her gaze to the screen. "You ever notice how his chin just gets bigger and bigger with each passing year?" she asked, gesturing lazily at the screen with a pretzel. "Someday that baby's going to hatch, and some unlucky A-lister will be in for a big surprise." She bit down on her pretzel with a crunchy, sleepy smile, as if lost in pleasant contemplation of chin birth and celebrity attacks.

Buffy smiled too, but Willow wasn't looking at her and didn't see. Buffy stood there in her own living room, conscious that she was just standing there; extraneous to the scene. She noticed not for the first time that she and Willow were not looking at each other, not talking to each other. They'd been that way for months, on and off. It hurt.

"Will," she said, moving to sit on the edge of the coffee table, having to do so carefully, having to push away the short glass with clinking ice and the bottle to make room. Willow looked at her from her nest in the cushions, lips curled in a tiny Willow smile, eyes friendly. "I thought maybe you might want to talk now."

"About what?"

Buffy smoothed her skirt down, then looked up. "A-about Spike, or about you--or Tara. Or you and Tara. About yesterday, even. About anything, Will." She held Willow's eyes, trying to let everything that was earnest and hopeful in her shine out. "I know I've been sort of, sort of hard to talk to lately, and the last few days haven't helped, but--"

"Buffy." Willow smiled, face unchanging from its placid friendliness. "It's okay. Don't worry. It's all good."

But it wasn't all good, Buffy thought. "I, I'd like to think that. But it doesn't seem very--"

The smile was edging away, and something darker was simmering under the surface of Willow's face. "Hey, I, I appreciate your caring and all," she said, sounding anything but appreciative, "but you know, you can't just sit down here and pull up a table and think you can just talk all over me like the last six months haven't happened, like now that Spike's back you want to be all Chatty Cathy, who's-your-girlfriend." Her head twitched on the pillow, and her voice was a bit cold, a bit mocking. "It doesn't work like that, Buffy."

"Doesn't work like what?" Buffy said, not understanding, feeling her chest constrict as the tension between them built again in its familiar way. "Why can't we just talk?"

"On your schedule, at your whim," said Willow, not hiding her anger any more, but too drunk or too sleepy to exert herself toward sitting up, or maybe she just didn't care enough. She lay there looking up at Buffy, eyes flashing but body huddled in on itself under the fuzzy blanket. "You really don't even know you do it, do you?" Willow laughed, a bitter unnatural sound. "God,
whatever. Just go shag your dead man." She stopped looking at Buffy just as Dawn had, and stared at the TV set again.

Buffy, shocked to speechlessness, nearly to tears, stood and walked away. She paused at the entrance to the hall and pressed her head against the wooden door frame. She felt a pent-up dam inside her ready to burst and she struggled with it, wanting to scream and cry and rage against her friend. But something--pride, guilt, she couldn't tell which--kept her from letting it out.

"I'll be back in the morning," she said, voice barely escaping from her tight throat.

Willow said nothing.

Buffy left.

He'd revamped the crypt. In only one day, it had been restored to its normal uncheery chill and starkness, the beer cans swept out, the trash removed. She wondered how he'd done it, tried to picture him calling a vampire maid service, or dragging trash bags to the curb. There was a new TV, a new armchair. The fridge hummed. She looked around and felt something in her tremble at the difference and the sameness. Year after year, this was it, this was the dead center of her existence. Crypts, vamps, isolation from her friends and her sister and any pretense of a normal life.

Buffy turned to go, stood there for a long minute at the doorway to the crypt looking out at the empty night, then turned back again, went to the ladder and descended.

Downstairs, the same household magic of cleanser and mop had been applied, and the place looked almost like she remembered. More candles glowing against the dark rock; there was a new bed. A nice bed, even. And a table with wine breathing on it. She crossed her arms around herself, hugging her pain and tears inside where they belonged, but feeling them escape anyway. Tears falling, herself--

"Easy, love," he said and his arms came around her from behind, wrapping around her waist to rest under her own. His cheek rubbed along the side of her head, tenderly as a big cat marking its territory. "Always a let-down after the battle's over."

She sobbed, and turned to press her face into his chest. He held her and let her cry until she was cried out, and when the clutch of her hands began to ease at last, he picked her up and carried her to the bed; laid her down. She curled up on the covers in a haze of misery broken by his light touch on her shoulder, soothing murmurs, and in that haze she fell asleep.

He watched her sleep. Sitting on the end of the bed, arms resting across his knees and hands clasped in front of him, he hunched and watched his slayer. Her eyelids flickered with dreams he
didn't envy, and her body was restless even in rest. When she rolled over on her back, arms flung out, head turning to one side to bare her neck, his need caught in his throat and he groaned softly at the pain. He wanted to sink his teeth into her, he wanted to shag her. Devour her and resurrect her and devour her again.

It would be so easy to take his pain away, and hers. One bite and a long drink, slayer blood coursing through him, and then a gift back. She'd be free at last of all her human sorrows, and she'd love him the only way he could be loved. By a demon.

Spike sighed, got up from the bed, and went to pour himself a glass of cold cow. It tasted like shit—not exactly organic, was it—and he grimaced as it went down.

You had your chance, didn't you, he thought, staring into a candle flame. Here's your soul, on a silver platter, take it and be hers. No gypsy curses, no strings attached, but oh.

The pain, love. The pain.

He closed his eyes, remembering the heavenly fire ripping through him, bringing with it the brutal understanding of what he was and had done. Something lost, flung out of grace, a thing so vile it made the angels weep. A thing so vile it made her weep. The memory was strange, like a bad sketch on the thin tissues of his mind, not really capturing what he'd seen. But he knew too well what he'd seen and felt, with William flooding back into him, filling his dry, lifeless veins with soul again as the rapture broke over them both and made them one. And he hadn't wanted it. Flung back into himself, then again into his demon with its full-force gale, he'd known that softness and torment wasn't for him. Let Angel deal with that; he was the fruity sodding hero, puppet to the Powers That Be. Only room for one vamp with a soul in this neck of the world; start piling up too many of them and someone was bound to take notice.

I'll stay in the shadows where I belong, thought Spike, and let's see which one of us survives longer, mate.

Funny, though, wasn't it. He hadn't chosen the demon, either. And now he knew there was one still living in him, and that he, Spike, wasn't...quite it. Not quite the killing machine he'd thought himself, not quite the Big Bad. If he had been, he'd have nailed his slayer by now. Drained her or turned her; no hesitation, no guilt. I am a remorseless bastard, thought Spike, holding his palm over the candle flame and staring at it coldly while it singed his hand. I am evil, abominable, a shock to the system, I am amoral and irredeemable and untouched by--

"Ow," he said suddenly and yanked his smoking hand from the flame.

Self-disgust laying heavily across his shoulders, Spike returned to bed and gloomily regarded his one true love. He slid off his shirt and stretched out next to her, took her in his arms.

"Peas and jam, mom," she murmured, rising out of sleep to regard him through slitted eyes. She blinked up at his watchful face, sniffed once, looked around the room and seemed to sense the passage of time. "Mm, sorry," she said, smiling wanly. "I guess I was more tired than I realized."

"Cried yourself out," Spike said, stroking her back. "Want to talk about it?"

Buffy looked at him, then flicked her lashes down to hide her eyes. "Not really."

Spike smiled to himself, a bit sourly. You can get away with that because I let you, love. The others'll call you on it sharp, won't they. Well, no matter. He'd only asked out of politeness. He was her lover, not her bloody alienist.
"Want a glass of wine?" he asked, to fill the silence. "Unmixed."

"No," she said, far more emphatically than the question warranted. "No wine."

Another long minute passed.

"Want a shag?"

Her cheek moved against his chest with the feel of a smile. "Okay."

Hello, thought Spike, perking up. 'Bout damn time. He rolled and shoved her onto her back with one fluid movement. A hard ache was already filling his nether bits and she was making little breathless noises and wriggling under him, trying to hitch up her skirt. Christ, he thought, wildness breaking through him like lightning. He helped her yank down her knickers and push up her skirt--pink panties catching around her thighs, not going any further--and he cursed and ripped the flimsy material off and she gasped and spread her legs, heat radiating from her core, all for his cold hard wick, and he gasped and fumbled at his belt. She sought him with one hand, but he pushed it away; he couldn't bear her touch, it would be all over, and damn embarrassing that would be for a first-time reunion fuck, because he intended to make it good. Oh, hell, he just intended to make it.

"God, hurry," she said, digging her fingers into his arms hard enough to break the skin with her sharp nails. Ecstasy flared through him, and he forced his zipper down, freeing himself. He rolled up across her like a wave breaking the shore, and shoved in between her legs. Her heat clasped him and he stiffened. His eyelids fluttered heavily shut as he held himself steady, willing himself not to come, not daring to thrust.

"Oh, god," she cried, "Oh god, god, god--goddamn it, Spike--"

He heard himself make a sound like a sob as he was pulled in by her sweet, wet cunt and strong hands; she was forcing him deeper into her, wrapping her legs around him, crying out, rocking up to meet him, all of her heat and need for him. He could feel his bones unchilling as she shared her warmth. It was better than the sun. She moved him, she was making him move.

Spike let himself thrust then, finding purchase on the bed, holding himself off her slightly so that he could pull out and drive back in deep. One good stab made her go rigid, made her arch and mewl like a kitten, and that was all she wrote and he threw his own neck back, swore her name, and spilled into her with long, erratic pulses that gave him the illusion his heart was working.

"Oh," she said, her body clamping around him again, her head coming up off the pillow. And suddenly she rolled him over onto his back; she was shuddering, eyes closed, skirt hitched up around her waist, and she rode him mercilessly with quivering little squeezes that kept him hard, because after all, he didn't have a heart, and blood did his bidding. He lay back, content to let her work herself on his staff, to hold her hips and watch as she arched and twisted and rubbed herself off on him like a nun losing her vows. She was a storm inside herself, and by the time she came again she was slick all over with sweat, her face framed by two thin tear tracks.

"Easy," he said, as she gasped for air and began to collapse forward on him. He drew himself out of her, sore and heavy, and feathered his hands across her waist. She slid with him down onto the sheets, lying on her side and breathing unevenly. Her mouth was swollen from biting her own lips, and Spike kissed her thoroughly for no better reason than he could.

She was all worked up. It was flattering to his pride, and balm to the twisted ache inside him. Facing her, Spike settled in to patient pillow-gazing while she came slowly down from her bliss.
He badly wanted to smoke a fag, but this was something worth savoring. After a time, Buffy focused on him and took his mouth with soft kisses. She was smiling at him with each one, all girlish and pink-cheeked. She certainly knew how to make a bloke feel he'd done his job.

"Can't believe I went five months without you," she murmured, groaning a little at the very thought.

"Can't believe I went five minutes without you," Spike said truthfully.

"Yeah, how did you do that?" She smiled and stroked her fingers down his chest.

"Heavy drinking, heavy metal, and heavy yanking, pet."

She tipped her gaze up. "No heavy women?"

His lips curved lightly, and his eyes narrowed. "Jealous, are we?" He slid his hand up under her shirt and bra and cupped one tit.

"Oh," she said, grinning a little.

They took another whirl on the merry-go-round, this time properly naked, and at a decent speed.

Later, leaning back against the headboard, her wrapped around him like ribbon on a package, Spike heard her say something about her basement.

"Sorry," he said, drawing himself back from his thoughts to give attention to her nattering. "Say again?"

"You were so not even listening, were you?" Buffy asked, piqued.

Spike crushed out his cigarette on the bedside table and tossed it at the empty juice can. "Was too. Something something washer and dryer something something basement."

She rolled her eyes. "I said," she began, and then she hesitated, changing tone to one more serious, her voice slowing down. "I said, why not come stay at the house. We could fix up the basement, put in carpet, bring the bed in. It could be...cozy."

He boggled politely at her, since she was clearly off her nut. "Yeah, well," he drawled, staring at her. "That's...well, that's quite an idea. But I don't think it'd work out."

"Why not?" She frowned a little, but not seriously, as if not quite allowing herself to hear his rejection. "Think of it. It'd be much more convenient, and I wouldn't have to worry so much about leaving Dawn--and ooh, hey, think about all the modern conveniences you can't get in your average one-bedroom crypt: cable TV, laundry privileges, hot and cold running me."

Spike looked at his daft love, feeling a mingled fondness and exasperation. "All very nice, pet, but somehow I don't think your friends would be too keen."

"They'll deal," she said confidently, sweeping away with those two breezy words a hundred future battles and his eventual, certain death at her friends' hands.

"No," Spike enunciated with care, "they won't." He issued a brief, sharp laugh and shook his head.

"Come on," Buffy said, sitting up to stare at him. "It's not that bad. They'll get used to you. They have before."

"You were so not even listening, were you?" Buffy asked, piqued.
"Oh, right. Used to me." He made ironical eyes at her, but then spoke gently. "I hate to be the one to break this to you, Buffy, but your friends are loyal, true, and good." She blinked at him, uncomprehending. "When they found out we were riding the wild pony together, you think they sat around playing canasta and chatting about it amiably?" He lifted his brows at her; her face showed that she was still refusing to get it.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying they did everything in their power short of killing me to try and pry me from you. If Red had been feeling up to snuff, you'd be sitting here in bed right now with a skunk, or maybe a golden retriever."

"Okay. Pause, rewind, erase image," Buffy said.

"Yeah." Spike frowned. "Good idea. But the point is, I'm evil and they know it. Only reason they ended up tolerating me in your life, Slayer, was because I convinced them I had something you needed."

Buffy flushed, then said in a strained voice, "You may not have chosen a soul, but you kept the chip. You're not—not evil."

This would have knocked him to his knees in gratitude, once, and to hell splitting hairs about whether or not she really believed it. Now, Spike felt impatience tightening in him, even a stir of anger. "Yeah," he said flatly, "I am. You may not want to think it, but there's a lot of things I could do if I had a mind to."

He stared at her and she stared back skeptically, and as the moment stretched unbroken by her, he suddenly knew she wasn't ever going to ask why he'd chosen his current existence over one with a soul. But he understood now, his own choice and hers. She wouldn't have wanted the man he'd have been with a soul, not in the long run; what she wanted was what she already had, a half-breed monster she could own without risk of love. He was to her the shell of badness; the illusion of good.

"So tell me something evil you've done lately," she challenged him at last.

"Beg pardon?"

"While you were gone. Free of me. Walking the wild side again. You must have cut a wide swathe. I mean, just because you don't cook doesn't mean you can't call up for delivery, right? Find some vampire chippie, make her your willing ho. Do you and your bidding too."

Spike felt a chill touch his spine and uncurl down into his balls. Bloody hell, he thought, trying not to show his dismay. The hell of it was, she didn't believe what she was saying, or didn't want to. She was just being flip. "Right," he said aloud, feeling his way ahead, knowing he wouldn't lie to her and hating himself for it. "Well, yeah. There's that." He paused. "Tried that, actually. Thing is, it's no fun being evil by proxy. I'm a hands-on kind of fellow."

"Right. Hands on." She smirked as if remembering where his hands had been earlier.

"Like to do my own killin'," Spike continued, looking at her seriously. "More honest that way." She made a long-suffering face, clearly dismissing his words. He realized she wasn't even really hearing him. "Did one girl," he said slowly and carefully, watching her eyes, trying to drill inward to where she lived and make sure she got it. "When I hit New York, 'bout a month after I left. Young thing beggin' for change on a corner. I'd hooked up, just like you said. Young vamp, just
turned that year, eager to please an old man like me. She killed, I fed...that's how I knew it wasn't for me."

Buffy's face had been slowly changing as he spoke, as he took her innocence. "Are you telling me," she asked--and there she was, he thought, possibly the last vision of her he'd ever have, naked and pure as a virgin in his bed, looking like Joan of Arc with her short fine hair and holy eyes--"Are you telling me you killed a girl because you had to know?"

"I killed her because I was hungry."

"Oh, sorry. Silly me," Buffy whispered, tears filling her eyes, her voice cracking. "That makes it all right then."

Spike pulled the stiff, cold cloak of honesty around himself and kept his voice hard: "Thought you wanted to know. You asked the question, you need the answer. You said you cared about me. About me, Buffy. Not some toffed-up blighter with a smooth line."

She got up off the bed, stumbling away without even a thought for her clothes, and he leapt up after her, grabbed and turned her around. "Look at me. Look at me," he said deliberately, and she did, eyes spilling tears. "Not just a leather coat and a pretty face, love. Don't got a soul." He ground the words in. "You want that, you know where he lives."

"Oh god," she said, staring through him. "I thought I could do this. I was so wrong."

Spike dug his hands into her shoulders, feeling desperate now to connect with her. He knew her well, he should have expected this collapse. Say nothing and she'd bask in blissful ignorance all her days; tell her the truth and she crumbled. "That was my last kill. You know I wouldn't lie to you."

"Maybe that's what I..." She broke off, tried to turn away. "I have to get out of here."

"No." He held her, kneading his hands into her muscled shoulders to immobilize her. Disbelieving, Buffy choked half-hysterically on laughter and tears. "No?"

"No." Spike held her firmly. "You want bad, but you don't want what's real. This is real, Buffy. Give it a taste."

"You don't even--don't even feel sorry for killing her, not because it's wrong--she was just a meal to you." She was begging him with her eyes to deny the accusation, to lie.

"You're right," Spike said deliberately. "I'm not sorry. Not because it's wrong, anyhow."

He felt her go stunned and still in his grasp. The horror on her face told him she was realizing who he was all over again, as if for the first time, reawakening to everything she'd made herself forget when she'd started coming regular to his bed. "You're a monster--" Her right hand rose to deliver a blow.

Tired, cynical, angry, he grabbed her wrist. "One who's damn tired of reruns." He yanked her in and kissed her. She struggled, not as forcefully as she should have, and he spun her back to the bed and fell with her onto the covers, pinning her down across them, game facing and making her look at him.

"Care for this, Slayer. Care for me." He kissed her more gently; her lips, her jaw. She was limp and
unmoving beneath him. He took a chance and stroked her hair with one hand. "Said I'd change for you and I have. Now it's your turn. Change your lines for me. 'Cause if you don't we'll be spinnin' our wheels in this rut until time runs out or one of us is dust."

"Or both," she said, barely moving her lips.

Spike unvamped and gazed at her, clear eyed. "I love you like a terrible wound. You're the soul I don't have...but you're no angel, pet. And I'm not sayin' that just because you kill my kind. I'm unnatural. You are too." He paused, watching thoughts flicker like shadows under the surface of her eyes. "You can have your will with me, if you only let me in."

There was a long silence between them, and then she whispered from the edge, "How can I trust you?"

"Try." He touched her cheek. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"I lose my soul, I lose my friends, the world ends in fire and death and we all end up in hell."

Spike blinked, momentarily blown off course. "Uh. Yeah. Right." He rallied. "But that could happen any old day, couldn't it?"

"One minute you say you're evil, then you say you've changed--what am I supposed to think?"

"I am evil. I have changed."

He watched her consider this. "Evil does as evil is," she said after a moment, stubborn in her strange beliefs.

"Not true," Spike said, feeling faintly insulted. Still, she wasn't crying any longer. It gave him hope. "I'm rotten to the core. Doesn't mean I have to go about bitin' everything I see to prove it."

"You're not just evil, you're cracked."

He grit his teeth. "Not hard to see why, is it? You can't even quote right."

She sighed, and it was over. He felt it the moment the fight left her, though she was still tense beneath him. When she spoke, it was from someplace fragile and her voice was whispery, as if she was feeling her way out of the dark, trying to put into words something she hadn't before. "I think sometimes, it's like--like having a lion for a pet. This thing that would rip me to shreds if I'm not careful. Eat whatever it wants. Amoral."

"Lions do other things, too," he said. And he smiled at her, moving. 
Chapter End Notes

This was first tentatively titled "The Devil Drives," but then I changed it.

I've been told that a virtual season is not too marketable, because so many bad ones have been done. And I don't know whether I'll have the steam to push my engine to the end of the tracks. I hope so.

There's a little backstory here and here on the whole season noir concept which really has nothing whatsoever to do with the story above, and does have a few broad, spoilery things for stories to come.

This is not beta-read; I admit to finishing it in a white-hot haze, scanning it tiredly several times, spellchecking it, then posting. Feel free to send feedback, including any stuff that chafes your hide, like omitted words, continuity gaffes, blah blah, blah, and excluding rants on how Spike/Buffy is evil, because I don't want to hear it. I don't think there are any big errors left, but who knows. I'm sure I'll look back at this and groan at some egregious shit I missed.

I love love love, in a respectful way, Joss and everyone at Mutant Enemy, and the brilliant BtVS actors, and would never try to poach their territory, except in the very non-money-making way that I'm doing now, which I hope they'd understand if they ever saw this, not to mention that I'd never ever sue if, you know, they wanted to steal things from me in friendly retaliation. Oh, and I'd work for large amounts of money too. And move to L.A. And sign my soul over in blood to some demonic guy named Skip or Ted or Bart. And...yeah. Just went to the fantasy place there for a minute. I'm back now.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
Chapter Notes

This is the season opener in what I'm viewing as an alternative season 8, with (this may be a no-brainer) an AU season 7 in between; everything branches off from "Gone."

The title is from Machiavelli's "The Prince."

*Therefore it is necessary for a prince to understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man. This has been figuratively taught to princes by ancient writers, who describe how Achilles and many other princes of old were given to the Centaur Chiron to nurse, who brought them up in his discipline; which means solely that, as they had for a teacher one who was half beast and half man, so it is necessary for a prince to know how to make use of both natures, and that one without the other is not durable. A prince, therefore, being compelled knowingly to adopt the beast, ought to choose the fox and the lion; because the lion cannot defend himself against snares and the fox cannot defend himself against wolves. Therefore, it is necessary to be a fox to discover the snares and a lion to terrify the wolves. Those who rely simply on the lion do not understand what they are about.*

-- Machiavelli

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She parried the downward blow of his quarterstaff with a kick that rolled it off her shin, then tried to hook it with her ankle to send it flying, but the grip of his hand didn't yield; he snagged her instead and the ground rose to meet her. Rolling into the fall, she kept rolling as the training weapon came down point-first where her ribs would have been and stabbed into the mat. She leaped up and had to immediately duck a swing that sent her diving again. An impression of old, stinking mats, her own sweat and heartbeats, and the thick heat of the room coalesced around her. Her shirt stuck to the small of her back, and a healing cut across her upper back itched unreachably.

"Watch your breathwork," he said in a sharp, level voice as she retreated a few steps, then added in derision: "You're huffing like the little engine that couldn't."

She replied only in the privacy of her mind, where she could say twenty rude things without needing any breath at all, then went for her own quarterstaff, knocked aside minutes ago. She almost made it, but he swept in alongside her, sent it skidding away with the tip of his weapon and then tripped her as ruthlessly as a hockey player. Damn, she thought, as she broke the fall with more bones than grace. Angry to find herself on her back, she flipped her weight into her hands and kicked up at him with two feet. He staggered back.

"Good," he said curtly, with the unnatural composure she wanted to rip from him. "But you're still not--"

Rebounding upwards, she cross-blocked his staff with one arm and punched his chest. He fell back a step.
"--giving it--"

She tried to knee him, but his staff swept down like a clock hand and all she got was a kneecapping bang.

"--your full effort."

Fiercely, she yanked the stick away from him, snapped it in two across her upthrust thigh, and tossed the pieces aside.

Spike tipped his head an inch and looked at her, annoyance straining the mask of patience he wore for their sessions. "If you're through warming up and breaking your toys," he said. And vamped to finish the thought: "We'll move on to the hand-to-hand."

He leapt for her and she planted her feet and turned her shoulder to him instinctively, letting his weight surf across her as she curled in on herself and flipped him off with a flex of her back. He fell and twisted right-side up smoothly as a cat to meet her follow-up. She peppered fast blows to his chest and face which he blocked with equal speed, then he danced back, spun fast and kicked her hard enough to send her flying.

"Shift your weight," Spike said as she jumped up slightly off balance. He was still irritatingly calm and he was definitely not sweating, even though his black tee clung to him like a second skin. They circled each other widely, each looking for a point of attack, the only sound in the big room their feet sliding across the mat, her breaths. Buffy kept her eyes locked to his, trying to read the next move there, knowing better than to believe the lying movements of his body. His eyes told her more, even framed by demon, a strange face that had become familiar; though there were times like now, seeing its ridged sinistery in dusty, filtered sunlight and in this mundane room, when she felt she might have fallen asleep, slipped into another world where nightmares walked by day.

Oh, wait. That was this world.

Maybe she dreamed her life.

"Steady," he said in a lulling voice, and then flung her across the room. For that, she flung him back.

Time kept changing speeds, blending blurs with the illusion of slowness, pulling at her like taffy and then gradually evening out until Buffy was moving in the zone, like Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix* but with no special effects to distract her. Nothing existed beyond this circle of struggle; nothing needed to be done except breathe and fight. Her focus narrowed to a flow of moves--blow, parry, back thrust kick, side-step, spin, side thrust kick--and to the muted slaps of feet on mat, the thunk of bodies falling, the smack of flesh striking flesh.

"Give it to me, Slayer," he challenged, and her hand closed around an imaginary stake. When she got a killing blow in through his defenses, he accepted it, and they broke and began again. When he got one of his own in, shock and fear wrenched her for a moment, before she forced herself to accept it. Begin again. Frustration built and she rode it out grimly. It was about winning, it always was; but she was winning through learning. It didn't make her dead here and now, just because he could get a blow in. Didn't make her dead. Because he was the one vampire who would never kill her.

He feinted suddenly and, turning her head quickly to track him, a piece of sweat-slicked hair whipped across her eye, distracting her with a lash of pain and blindness, and she hesitated. A second later a hand grasped her throat hard enough to cut off her breath, and another drove up
under her ribs, miming a stab. Not the gentle kind of mime, either. But he released her quickly.

"Game over," Spike said, demon sliding away to leave his face smooth as any living man's.

Buffy thought she heard disapproval in his voice, and that was unacceptable. "Again," she gasped angrily, tossing hair out of her eyes and tensing with arms upraised to begin anew.

"That's two hours." He stepped back, leaving himself open with hands at his sides, but fingers fanned like weapons at the ready. The set to his face told her to stand down. "Don't want to drain your batteries."

Muscles trembling and ticking, Buffy clenched her fists harder for a moment; then forced herself to let go. "It's this--this damn hair," she said, feeling a wild rage surge up inside as she shoved the offending strands off her face. "It's too short to pull back and too long for fighting and that's it. I'm cutting it again."

"Up to you, pet." Spike walked over to pick up a towel, and tossed it to her. Following, she caught it and rubbed the rough material over her face. "Though you know I like a bit more to grab onto."

She surfaced from the towel and glared at him. "I could say the same," she snapped.

Any normal man would have been mortally insulted, but he was just too cocky, and hell, Buffy thought, hating Freud with a passion.

"Oooh hoo hoo," he laughed, face broadening in amusement. "Not what you said the other night."

"Whatever I said, I'm sure I was lying."

He pursed his lips. "Mmm. 'Fraid I can't believe that, sweetheart," he said, eyeing her intimately. "No," he decided with a smirk. "I dare say I'm giving you plenty, if those precious little meows you make are anythin' to go by."

"I don't meow!" she said, and punched him hard in the nose.

"Ow." He stared at her as if she were bonkers, then the knowing smile crept slowly back into his lips. "PMS time again, innit?" His tone suggested everything was clicking into place. "Biggest no-brainer of medical discoveries in the last century, that was."

"You know what you get if you cross a slayer with PMS?" she asked, then punched his nose again.

"Bloody hell!" he barked.

"Exactly."

And thus my grand exit, she thought with satisfaction as she grabbed her bottled water and headed into the front of the magic shop. Suddenly she felt far more cheerful. The others were gathered around the table, her own little Scooby gang. All but Anya, who perched nearby on a stool doing a highly unnecessary inventory of dried geckos and other whatnots. She'd tried earlier to rope in Buffy, but pleading work-out time had secured a pass on that fun project.

Willow was bent over her laptop, a picture of serene redheadedness, absorbed in what could have been any possible number of things--homework, spells, web design--any one of which Buffy felt sure would make her eyes glaze over if details were provided. Probably homework, she thought; it was soon enough for homework, wasn't it? Buffy felt a pang. Homework, fresh binders, sharpened pencils...homework, essays, algebra. No. Cancel pang. She didn't miss it. But she liked seeing the
stack of textbooks on the table around Willow and Tara; the continuity and normalcy of schoolwork, its schedules, made her feel anchored to something bigger and simpler than good and evil, even if vamps treated school bells like dinner bells. And Willow and Tara themselves--they were anchory too. Buffy held this belief with great optimism; at the end of summer the two women had returned from Taos tanned and smiling, wearing matching beaded bracelets and sharing a mellow vibe between them that said better times lay ahead.

Buffy took a seat at the table, stretching a bit as her muscles cooled off.

"Well, aren't we a sweaty betty," said Xander, looking up from his magazine and eyeing her. Buffy could hear the attempt at good humor in his voice, and the undercurrent of something else which had to do with her and Spike and resentment and other dark and twisty feelings he'd been sharing and she'd been steadily ignoring for the past three months.

"I know," she said, looking down at herself with a grimace. "I wish we could install a shower in this place. Ooh, and a sauna," she added, as happy-fantasy-thought struck her.

"It would be kinda nice to have a kitchen," Willow mused, looking up from her computer. "To do stove-top spells."

"And bake brownies," piped up Tara.

"Let's not forget the importance of those." Xander gave a smart nod of respect to Tara, who grinned back.

"Oh, and hey, we could get a bread maker," said Willow, getting into the spirit. "And fill the store that wafty fresh-bread smell. We could give bread away to the customers, bountiful bread for the poor--or, we hope, the not-so-poor; because, you know, customers."

"They should be spendy with the money," affirmed Tara understandingly.

Xander gave Willow a quirky look from under his brows. "Say you didn't know us. Would you want snacks from a place that sells newt eyes and ground centipede?"

"Me personally?" said Willow, sliding out a little grin.

"You do have a point." Xander paused. "Say you weren't us--"

"Enough!" said Anya, who'd come to hover nervously next to the table. "No bread makers, no kitchens, no showers. These things cost--"

"Money," finished, Tara, Xander, and Willow. Buffy ducked her head to hide a smile.

"Oh, fine," said Anya, hurt. "I've become predictable, haven't I. You can say it. Good old Anya, always thinking about the money. Money, money, money. Well, if I didn't, do you know where you'd all be right now? You'd all be sitting around a cardboard box in an alley, with strange men coming up for hand-outs, but you wouldn't be able to give them any, because you'd have nothing in your pockets but lint and sorrow. And possibly a tic-tac."

"Well, we do have houses," said Willow dryly, while Buffy mouthed silently to Xander, lint and sorrow?

"Well, really, let's just consider that a moment, shall we?" began Anya.

"Uh, let's not," Buffy broke in quickly, not wanting to get the two of them started, particularly
when it concerned the subject of her house. "Anya's right."

That gave everyone pause.

"Of course I am," said Anya, then looked to Buffy. "How am I right this time? Please, be precise."

Buffy looked around the table, communicating with her eyes her earnestness so that everyone knew she wasn't just blowing hot air to shut Anya up. "If she wasn't so good with money, I'd certainly be living out of a box right now." Or possibly a crypt, she thought. She'd thanked Anya often, and sometimes so profusely as to be embarrassing for them both, but she'd never done so in front of the others. "All those investments and funds and IRAs and SLAs--"

"Symbionese Liberation Army?" said Willow with raised brows.

"--and stuff. I could never in a million years have figured out all of that," Buffy admitted.

"And if Giles wasn't sending a check every month from the profits of his half of the business, I wouldn't have anything to invest for you." Anya smiled brightly with the kind of pleasure that comes from delivering the answer to a math equation.

The blow of embarrassment was familiar, and Buffy managed to smile it off with only some difficulty. It wasn't as if they didn't all know her situation. She glanced around the table again to make sure no one was about to jump down Anya's throat on her behalf. Xander looked pained, and Willow faintly disgusted, but she met Buffy's eyes and clearly resigned herself to silence.

"Yes," said Buffy into the small, uncomfortable silence. "That's true. Anyway, thank you, Anya." She smiled up at the woman, humbling down some pie. "You've really made all the difference."

"You're welcome," said Anya buoyantly, as if she were experiencing a minty-fresh sensation of destiny fulfilled. Fairly jittering with energy, she smiled around at them, fluffed her hair, and with pride and happiness said, "I'm going to go sell some very expensive crystals now to that lady with the hideous dress." And she turned on her heel and strode gracefully off.

"That's my girlfriend," said Xander, face softening a bit with a rueful smile as he watched her go. And he too sounded strangely proud.

"Quite the little money-box, isn't she," said Spike, coming up with a mug of blood and sitting down next to Buffy with a strong smell of cigarette smoke. He draped his coat over one thigh and leaned back in his chair. "You ought to see 'bout clonin' her. If they can do it with sheep, Red here should be able to make it so with magic and a snip of hair."

"Thanks," said Xander with forced politeness, "but I've got enough on my hands as it is."

"Know what you mean," said Spike, directing a small, sidelong scowl Buffy's way.

And Buffy, seeing Xander winding up to strike, said quickly, "Wow, look at the time. Dawn will be getting back soon and I, I really stink, so I'd better go, go home, go shower." Go, dear god, she told herself, standing. "Anyone want to ride with?" She glanced at Willow. "Will?"

Willow glanced up, one brow raised, and gave a tiny, polite smile. Everyone was being oh so polite, Buffy couldn't help but notice. "No, I'll catch a ride with Tara."

She turned an inquiring look on Spike, feeling highly conscious of Xander's gaze and everyone's listening ears. "You coming?"
"Got things to do," he said curtly.

Oh fine, Buffy thought. Be the sulky vampire. She stood there for another moment, frustrated by everyone's silence, at the broody energy that hadn't seemed quite so palpable when she first came in the room. She wanted to say something to crack open the tension, but didn't know what or how. She spoke her mind when necessary, when she had to be Buffy the Slayer, but over the past few years it had somehow grown harder to be Buffy the Summers. Too many things were unspoken when it came to her friends, maybe even unspeakable. Her friends were family; families, from her experience, dredged up unspeakable subjects only to fight about them. No more fighting in the family, Buffy had vowed to herself after Spike's return; and she'd drawn them all into a compact, persuading them of its risks. Fighting broke everything to pieces, and they had to stick together.

And yet, the compact wasn't quite working as she'd hoped; and sometimes her friends seemed more distant than ever before.

I really hate this time of the month, Buffy thought. And, feeling not entirely unsulky herself, she left.

Spike made a point of staying around long enough to finish his blood, despite the strain. The Scoobies didn't exactly make a vamp feel welcome; and in the three months since his return to Sunnydale they hadn't softened to him much. Not long after he'd come back, Buffy told him she'd laid down the law. Sat the lot of them down, apparently, told them to suck it up and lay off him. He'd felt smug as hell for all of about a day, just thinking about that scene and wishing he'd been a fly on the wall; but if he'd known she was going to do it beforehand, he'd probably have tried to stop her. It didn't exactly help his case.

On the other hand, what case? He didn't give a toss. Nothing was going to win over Buffy's friends, except maybe the one thing he didn't have.

If I had a soul, I'd still cheerfully thrash the lot of you, Spike thought, looking around the table of cranky sidekicks.

Well, not Tara, he decided grudgingly, sparing her from imaginary violence on his whim at the sight of her earnest face bent over a textbook. She and Red had their whole good-witch, bad-witch game down pat and who the hell knew how serious they were about it, but good-witch always had a sympathetic smile for him when things got rough.

"I'm off," he said, standing and pulling on his coat. He paused, waiting to see if they'd farewell him, but Xander and Willow didn't raise their eyes from their reading and even Tara was quiet. "Don't get all mawkish," Spike said irritably. "Hate these long good-byes."

And then Tara did save him, talking to him like you'd talk to a friend, making him feel grateful and faintly disgusted for that gratitude. "What are you up to tonight?" She was looking up at him kind-eyed. Even made it sound like she cared. He was a bit surprised.

"Oh, got a few errands to run. Visit the butcher's." And the blood-bank. "Liquor store." After it closed, of course. "Then thought I might stop by this new candle shop they've got out by the mall." To which he had a big key shaped like a tire iron. "Running low."
"Blood, booze, and candles," said Xander, shaking his head once. "It's a simple, minimalist life you have, Spike."

Spike stared at Xander, trying to puzzle out if that was insult or compliment, and Xander stared back with a dawning frown that suggested he didn't know either.

"Right," Spike said. "See you." And as he walked toward the basement where he could catch the sewer tunnel home, he thought see you and laughed at himself bitterly. Bloody hell. I'm gettin' all mannered. Next thing you know I'll be bakin' them biscuits.

It really was enough to drive a vamp to drink, and Spike resolved to get two cases of whisky this week instead of one.

Xander watched Spike exit, and as the basement door shut behind him looked at the others. "Is it just me, or is Spike getting a little..." He hesitated.

"Friendlier?" suggested Tara

"I was going to say 'scarier', but in the Better Homes and Vampires sense. I mean, designer candles." He delivered a short, scoffing laugh. "That's such a yuppie thing."

"I like candles," Willow said, giving Xander an annoyed look.

"Well, it's a witchy thing too," Xander back-pedaled. "That goes without saying. But you girls use them for practical reasons." No I did not just say 'girls', he thought, as Willow's eyebrows lowered like two little red guillotine blades. Oh, man, I am so screwed.

"Have you seen his crypt lately--the downstairs?" asked Tara, luckily before Willow could take his head off for the remark. "He has plants."

"Plants?" Xander seized the diversion and boggled. "As in living things that grow? Now that's just wrong."

"He has all these little UV lights hooked up," said Tara. "It actually looks really nice."

"Downstairs in Spike's crypt?" said Willow, turning to stare at Tara with confused hurt in her eyes. "What were you doing down there? And why didn't you tell me you'd gone to visit him?"

Tara blinked. "Oh, it was nothing. He just left some blood at the apartment one night right after we got back." She seemed to be realizing and regretting her words even while she spoke them. "You and I, I mean, after we got back from our trip. He put it in the fridge to keep cool and then forgot it, and, um, this really isn't coming out well."

"He was at your apartment?" said Willow, even more incredulously. "With blood?"

"Willow," said Tara, her voice gentling and firming at the same time. "It was nothing. He was just stopping by on his way home. He wanted to borrow some ingredients for a no-pest spell." She glanced at Xander. "Rats," she confided.
"Huh. I thought vamps liked rats. Tasty snacks, like Little Debbies, but with juicy veins and fast little legs." Eww, he thought, and wished for the good old days when such a remark would have caught Willow's attention, when she would have responded by saying, 'Okay, that mental image will resist my brain scrubbies for quite a while.' Instead, she was still frowning at Tara, looking all lesbo co-dependent and scary.

"Well, I think maybe there can be such a thing as too much rat." Tara smiled at him in a very direct way, clearly unwanting to meet Willow's accusative eyes.

Okay, conversation has hit the iceberg, is sinking fast. To the lifeboats, Xander thought. "Too much rat. You know, I'm there. Too much rat. Oh boy, could I tell you some stories--"

"You really don't trust me enough to tell me anything anymore, do you?" asked Willow, still looking at Tara as if she couldn't look away. "Our whole trip, getting away from it all, getting in touch with ourselves--what was that about if you won't even talk to me?"

And Invisible Xander, deciding now was a good time to be elsewhere, got up and left them squabbling in low voices to join Anya at the register.

"Love of my life, light of my loins, lollipop," he said, resting one hip against the counter. "How goes it? The money still rolling in?"

Anya glanced up from her cash drawer, smiling happily. "I made her spend a hundred dollars. With no magic, just with me, doing the talking thing!" Her cheer was loony and infinitely sweet.

"Well, I don't know about the no magic part," Xander said, and he looked at her and couldn't look away.

The pre-Dawn, no-Willow house was a thing of quiet, Buffy found as she set down her bags of groceries on the counter, and she spent a happy hour shelving food and cleaning things that needed cleanliness. It was normal time, normal space; even with the blood bags she had to move aside to make room for the milk, and the weapons box in the living room that had to be vacuumed around, and the ripped bra she found in her jacket pocket as she started a load of laundry.

This is my brand of normal, she thought. The Buffy Summers name brand. And her thoughts meandered down the track they sometimes took, where she actually contemplated a career doing something productive that didn't involve killing; like maybe start her own clothing line of kicky slaywear with stake-sized pockets conveniently located mid-thigh, and shirts of unrippy fabric in soft pastel colors. As she was sketching in her mind an Old Navy-styled ad campaign starring her and a cast of singing, photogenic vampires, the phone rang.

"Hello," she said brightly, "Summers Summer Dresswear, how can I help you?"

"Er," said the hesitating voice, "Pardon? Buffy, is that you?"

"Giles!" She stiffened, heartbeat accelerating as it couldn't help but do. "Is everything all right? Are you okay? Where are you? You sound so close."
"Yes, yes, everything's quite all right," he soothed. "I'm in London. This is a social call...for the most part."

Buffy sat down in a chair. "What's the unmost part?" she asked, wanting to cut right to the chase.

"I'd rather not go into that for a moment, if you don't mind." His voice was firmly dissuasive. "Of firstmost importance: how are you?"

"I'm good."

A pause fell.

"Yes, well, do try to keep it to words of one syllables, please," he said, an edge of dry sarcasm entering his voice.

She smiled, relaxing a little. "I'm good," she said more warmly. "What can I say?"

" Apparently very little. I shall have to question you, you know, if you've nothing to volunteer."

"Good grief, Giles, what do they have you doing over there? You sound all bobby."

"I-I sound...what?"

"Bobby," she said doubtfully. "Isn't that a police officer?"

"Oh. Oh, yes. It is. No, I'm not, er, acting in that capacity." He paused. "So, you're well," he said, and it was still a question. "And Dawn is doing well?"

"There's a brat factor, but yeah. She's good. School just started." God, it was like pulling her own teeth out, she thought. She had no idea how to talk to him except in bullet points. Go for another syllable, she reminded herself. "She was away this weekend--" Weekend, there's two syllables. "--visiting San Francisco with a friend's family, but she'll be back soon."

"And you, are you back in school?" The question came quietly, with a tone that said he already knew the answer.

Buffy was glad she couldn't see his face, his eyes. "Me? No. But hey, I've got this whole life of slayer leisure thing going on."

"Indeed. And leisure wear, from the sound of it."

"What? Oh, no. That was just...no."

"Ah," he said. And after a pause, he began forcing words out like a struggle. " What then--well, of course it's quite none of my business, actually; your--your life is your own as are the many and, and varied responsibilities you bear--"

"Giles, out with it," she said, feeling the tingling heat across her scalp and that low, roiling ache in her stomach which said he was going to ask her something she didn't want to answer, something heavy with implications about how she was living her life. Living it wrong.

"I was simply wondering what you were doing with your days," he said gently. "The slaying, that goes without question. But your schooling is important too, Buffy." Pause. "I know how difficult things are. I only wish I could do more. Have you thought, perhaps, of a student loan?"

"I so don't need more debt right now."
"No, of course," he said quietly, apologizing without saying so, in that way he did.

"My days," she repeated, half to herself, thinking of how the summer had flashed by. "I don't know what I do with my days. I do something, because the time goes by. I look after Dawn, I practice, I help run the shop--"

"Oh? You're working at the shop?" She could hear his voice perk up with relief at news of her gainful employment. "Good for you, Buffy. And how...terribly brave." There but for the grace of God, she could sense him thinking. "Are there any...difficulties?" He uttered the last word with delicate care; he might as well have said 'Are there any Anya?'

"No, no difficulties." She generously left out a fifteen-minute rant about Anya's insane micro-management and bossiness and exactitude and in short an attention to detail that was clearly wasted on a mortal, since she could have designed universes the way Willow designed web sites, all of which however made her a hell of a businesswoman.

"It's been interesting," she said to Giles, instead of all that. "She's quite the little powerhouse. I swear, Giles, you should see her these days. It's kinda scary. She went to a zoning meeting last week. And then talked about running for City Council. Give her ten years and she could be Mayor—or maybe some magic-chain-shoppy Ivana Trump." She paused. "I meant Mayor in a non-evil way. You got that, right?"

"One would hope." He cleared his throat. "Well, I've always known the shop was in good hands, of course, and Anya's e-mail correspondence is quite regular and thorough in regard to finances; though apparently not quite so thorough in regard to details of management that any normal person would think worth mentioning." His voice had turned slightly acerbic toward the end. Oops, thought Buffy. "Still, it's always good to receive confirmation of matters." His tone lightened. "And you said you've been practicing? I am glad to hear that."

And he did sound glad, terribly earnestly glad. "Yep. I'm the practicing girl. Go, me, go." She tried to convey blithe finality with that summary, and hoped he'd leave it at that.

"And who are you practicing with?" Giles asked, not leaving it at that. "Xander?"

Buffy picked at the hem of her trousers, again very glad he couldn't see her. And that he was several thousand miles away. "Er, no."

There was an ex-watcherful pause, during which she could almost hear his Giles gears turning in thought. "Not Willow?"

"No." It was a short list of possibilities; but even so, taking them one at a time would be a kind of slow, painful torture.

And yet, hear me say nothing, she thought.

"Surely not Tara?" he said, with a faint laugh.

"Hey, Tara has some butt-kicking moves on her," said Buffy, giving a spirited defense of girl power that served handy double-duty as a distraction. "And not just witch-fu either. She laid some serious punishment on a vamp the other night, right in the--well, in the way of him not sowing the seed anytime soon if you know what I mean, and now that I say that out loud, I'd appreciate it if you just forget I ever did. And, also, we dusted him, so I guess there really wasn't any--"

"You—you are sparring with Tara, then?" Giles broke in, astonishment escaping his reserve, or maybe mild panic.
"Er, no."

"Buffy, do stop saying 'er' in such a distinct way. My Britishness feels encroached upon. Now, please, with whom are you practicing?"

Buffy sighed at the sharp tone of command. "Spike."

There was a moment of silence, and then genial, librarian laughter. "Forgive me, the connection went bad there for a moment. I could have sworn--"

"Spike. I'm practicing with Spike."

"Buffy."

"I know what you're going to say."

"Well, please do say it for me then," he said sharply, wielding sarcasm like a blade. "It will save me the trouble of coming over there and saying it myself. To him. With a stake."

Buffy's face heated; his anger seared her through the phone lines. At such times she was a child again with him, being reprimanded by her father for some petty theft but feeling as if her whole life was under reproach.

"My god," he said. "Why didn't you tell me he was back in Sunnydale? I thought he'd left for good."

"Why didn't you tell me you'd seen him in London?" she shot back, brief anger flaring. "I had to hear it from him."

"Why should I have told you?" he asked, sounding stiff but not guilty. "I had no reason to think his movements outside of Sunnydale would hold importance for you." Giles paused. She could feel him thinking, feel tension in what was unsaid. "I fail to understand," he went on after several moments of dead, hissing air, "why you would let him back into your life, Buffy. He is dangerous, and I see now that his obsession with you could continue indefinitely. A vampire's existence can be long. Do you really want to encourage his attentions for what may possibly be years, even decades?"

It didn't occur to her for a moment to tell him the truth. If Giles had known she was sleeping with Spike--that she'd ever slept with Spike--he would have flown over, no question, and killed him. Maybe even without telling her. Slip into the country and out again, feign cool and empty sympathy when she called to deliver the news.

"He only comes as close as I let him," she said. "I'm in control, Giles. And he's...he's good with the training stuff." In fact--and she would never speak such profound disloyalty aloud to Giles or Spike or anyone--he was better at it than Giles had been. Physically she was coming into peak form, and only realizing as she did how far she'd been from it.

"Oh?" Giles sounded a bit put out, as if she'd snagged his unwilling attention. He fumbled a moment to say, "Well, one--one can only hope he's not been inculcating you with bad habits, encouraging your emotions to run rampant during battle."

"No incul-whatting," she assured him, wondering if it Giles was budging, if he could be talked around. It was hard to tell without being able to see him. "He's very disciplined. He even tells me to breathe, like you used to."
"Really." Giles's voice was cool and sour, and it didn't sound as if he believed her.

"Well, I told him all the things you used to do, and he, uh..."

"He what?"

"He read a few of the training books you left," said Buffy, somehow weirdly embarrassed for Spike's sake but wanting to ease Giles's mind.

"Indeed. How industrious of him. Did it not occur to you that to take so much trouble he may have an ulterior motive? Besides insinuating himself further into your life, of course."

Buffy rolled her eyes, slightly fed up. "Giles. Really. Trust me. Spike isn't exactly a contender for the next Doctor Evil. About the only thing he masterminds around here is a TV remote."

"I think you take him far too lightly, Buffy," Giles said in a warning tone. "It's easy to become lulled by familiarity. But your experiences with him should tell you all you need to know. He's killed slayers before, and he would have killed you once, without hesitation."

"I...I know that. I do." And she flashed on their most recent night together, Spike propped over her, burying himself inside her with soft gasps and wildly burning eyes, and her own helplessly escalating moans as she clung to him, and she flushed with the peculiar mix of shame and joy that defined her life lately. "It's just...and I don't want you to get all guilty and weird, but now that you're gone, it's like--it's like I look after everyone else, but who looks after me?"

"He looks after you," said Giles with comprehension, his voice suddenly fainter and more distant, as if the phone connection had weakened.

"And I don't have to look after him," she said. "He takes care of himself...and me."

"Yes, well. That's it, isn't it." A cracked, bleak laugh. She could picture him taking off his glasses. "I left. And now...now you must depend on the kindness of vampires."

"Giles, no. See, I knew this would happen. I just wanted you to understand."

"Oh, yes. Thank you. I do, quite--quite understand."

Buffy swallowed down a small lump of pain, and a long, long silence followed in which she could make herself say nothing more. She would have thought he'd hung up, except she could hear the hissing of the phone line still open between them.

"I did, er, I did call for another reason," he said at last, clearing his throat. "Business, not...not pleasure." The flat, dead way he said 'pleasure' nearly brought tears to Buffy's eyes. "There has been some discussion in the Watchers Council of late, regarding portents of a new ascension of evil into the world. All quite ambiguous, I'm afraid, and I won't go into the dull matter of textual interpretations on the phone, but will e-mail the pertinent details to Willow. Suffice it to say for now, there is debate."

"Have you had any intimations--any signs of something new rising?"

"No," she said. "Nothing. It's been quiet. More vamps since school started, that's about it."

"I see. Well...well, good. I trust you will all let me know if something does arise. I must call Angel also, speak to him. Find out if he has heard anything."

Angel. Without warning his name could still send a tiny shock through her. Memory tugged at a
love whose roots could never be entirely ripped from her heart; she felt their presence as something physical in her body. A contraction, an ache.

"Is there anything you wish me to tell him?" asked Giles gently, as if sensing her thoughts.

Buffy stared at a small bruise on the side of her wrist that she hadn't noticed before, turning her hand back and forth, flexing its muscles and finding them strong.

"No," she said. "I'm good."

Up along the highway the grey car drove, its battered exterior patched with rust and a small flag fluttering from the antenna of a skull and crossbones. Along one side of the car had been painted in white letters: The Dead Rule!

The front passenger window rolled down, releasing the sound of music into the hot California air: "papa would do whatever he could--preach a little gospel, sell a couple bottles of Doctor Good..." A hand flung out a beer bottle, then another; then a Doritos bag; then an empty Big Mac box. These were shortly followed by several more beer bottles, a crumpled paper bag, a deflated football, two magazines that flapped open to reveal centerfolds as they hit the wind, a copy of EW, and a bong.

"Dude," said a horrified voice from inside the car. "You tossed the bong."

"Aw...damn," said a second voice very slowly. "Hey, stop...drive back...I'll get it."

"Forget it, man. This baby isn't stoppin' until it hits Sunnydale."

"Who's he?"

"Where we're goin'. Sunnydale."

"Yeah," said the second voice, with placid assurance. "Right on." A moment passed. "Look at those trees. You see those trees?"

"Yeah."

"Nah, not those. The ones next to them."

"Oh, yeah."

"Those trees sing. They got the...beat. Like in the song. Pony in a trance, man. Pony in a trance."

"Dude. Be honest, be...spiritual. You ever hear trees like that?"

"Nah, man."

"This music just ain't right for the trees."

"Gypsies, tramps, and thieves--"
"Hey," said the first voice as a clattering sound was heard and Cher abruptly fell silent. After a second, a cassette tape went flying out the window. After another, strains of "Free Bird" began issuing from the car's speakers.

The window rolled up. The car kept driving.

"So. Portently evil," said Xander, "Delivered right to your inbox." He looked around the table. "Man--and I know I've said this before--but you really can get anything online these days."

"There are actually a few good mailing lists for portent and demon tracking," said Tara, tilting her head so that her long hair fell gently along her neck. "Once you weed out a ton of false sightings--and the posts about Harry Potter. There are farmwitches reporting demon sightings in Kansas; urban shamans spotting new trends in vampire activity." Her intensity level ratcheted up a notch as an incoming thought signaled. "You know, it's really amazing that there isn't more networking going on. We need to start a web site."

Hey, kids, let's put on a show, thought Xander. "Don't we have a web site?" he asked, raising his brows slightly.

"That's just for the store, though--we need something that would educate people in a grassroots way. Not just portents, but like, um, how to spot demons and vamps."

"Safety precautions," offered Willow, not looking up from her typing.

"Legal weapon alternatives for purse and pocket," said Tara, full of pep. "Dress safely to avoid vampire attacks." She grinned, and her head lifted a little, in a happy helium balloon kind of way.

Xander leaned forward, resting his arms on the table, thoughts rabbiting off on a tangent. "Huh. You know, I knew about the whole avoid-bright-colors thing, but it never hit me before. When you want to attract vampires--"

"The Buffy wardrobe," said Tara, nodding like a wise psychic.

"It explains so much," Xander said, feeling the sense of satisfaction that comes from solving an ancient riddle.

"It's kind of like saying, 'Here, kitty, kitty, kitty,' except, um...you don't usually kill your cats when they come," Tara finished awkwardly.

"Hey, guys!"

Xander looked up with the others to see Buffy coming toward them. He clocked the sleeveless pink lace, and the white skirt that would have had naughty-schoolgirl written all over it except, sorry, they didn't make words that tiny, and he looked at Spike hovering at her shoulder like a giant vulture, and he felt that, yes, he now knew far too much. He wondered in a detached way--detachment kept his head from exploding--why he didn't do it, make Spike a pile of dust, the kind of thing you could suck up in a Ready-Vac and dump in a garbage can. Giles would have backed him. Damn, he missed the man. For an old guy in tweed, he'd kicked in his share of grit and
"Kids," Spike said, taking a seat like he owned it.

A year, Xander thought with a flare of the old, deep anger he harbored; and he knew he was being obssesso boy but that was his job, he was the man now that Buffy had no one else to look after her; and a year she'd hidden this from them, her friends, pretending a repugnance for Spike that was entirely sham, that had covered for graveyard nookie and made them feel like fools when it came to light, as they remembered and connected the dots: how she'd begged off when they'd tried to fix her up on dates; Spike's strange restraint at their casual taunting; the way slayer and vamp developed an understanding about patrols that neither bothered to hide, because it was only patrolling, right, and "Catch up with you later on rounds, Slayer" had to be perfectly innocent if he said it in front of all of them, right?

Well, they'd certainly swallowed it--and then of course vomited it back up. The ugly results of that had driven Spike off, and Xander had been sure they'd never see his fiendishly handsome death mask again. And he'd been happy and the Hellmouth had been a better place. Yet here they were. Spike was back and he and Buffy had been together--purely in the sickest, strictest sense--more than a year. More like two in fact, but Xander wanted to round down instead of up. He wanted to round down and down until it was a nub; until sex with an unsouled monster dwindled to fling, then fantasy, then a small, fleeting thought that Buffy had entertained one afternoon and then rejected for sanity. He wanted her to stop dangling her sex-puppet on a string and get a real guy. A guy who'd bring out the good Buffy in her, instead of the one who lied and kept secrets and screwed dead men.

In short, he wanted Riley back.

Spike with Buffy was a cross to bear, but it should have been a cross that burned. And Xander, not for the first time, thought it was about time somebody called up Giles and told him just what the hell was going on in Sunnydale.

"So, what have we got, Will?" asked Buffy, in her start-the-meeting voice.

Willow looked up from the notes she'd been making with a brief tug of irritation, but it was a bad, wrong feeling, she reminded herself ironically, because Buffy was the meeting-starting leader and she was just the witch, the strength of her powers beside the point. In their magic card deck slayer trumped witch; it was that simple.

She buried irritation and managed a little smile; then, taking a deep breath and channeling her inner, upbeat Willow, said, "Well, I've read over what Giles sent and it's pretty interesting."

"Is that may-you-live-in-interesting-times interesting, or just words-are-funny interesting?" asked Xander.

"Kind of both." Willow turned the screen of the computer so the others could see it. "This is the translated text of a scroll from the Watchers library. Giles didn't send a copy of the original yet, because unfortunately they don't make a handy Naciran demon font, but he said he'd try to scan it." She paused to glance around and confided, "Apparently after our own special project way back
when, they made a no-scanner rule."

"Loose one little demon on the Internet," said Xander, shaking his head, "and every Brit's a Luddite."

Spike issued a small grunt. "Not your fault, mate, trust me."

"Anyway.\" Willow tapped the screen. "The scroll was written in the thirteenth century by a prophet who was considered to be a sort of demon Nostradamus, only nuttier. Which means they've pretty much ignored the scroll since then, until about a year ago when someone began translating it for fun."

"For fun?\" Buffy said, sounding appalled.

"Librarians. See British.\" Xander waved his hand dismissively. "Insert comment here."

"Apparently this guy started seeing correlations in the scroll to known events. Supernatural events, I mean, recorded in the watcher diaries. And I guess he started at the beginning, which makes sense--and, you know, he was doing it just for kicks, on his own, so-\"

"So there was no one to say, hey, why not skip ahead," Buffy noted dryly.

Willow quirked a rueful smile back. "Right. But eventually he got to the part which is the now and shared what he'd found."

"And we're looking at...what here?\" asked Buffy, staring at the laptop screen and then at Willow with a plea for summary. "How does it affect us?"

"And in the first goat-footed year of the new millennium the armed dove is slain and the far shore of sun and angels shall fall under the rise of a great darkness."

"Die? Again?\" Buffy said anxiously, then groaned. "Do I have to?"

Spike leapt up and slapped his hand on the table, making everyone jump and fall silent. "She is not dying again," he said in a hard, cold voice, leaning forward and staring Willow down as if she alone could be held responsible for that possibility.

"No, she's not," said Willow, staring back levelly at him.

"Oh.\" He blinked, sat back down. "Right then."

"Not dying," said Buffy in relief, while everyone else sat nonplused and looked at each other. "That's...that's good. Because I was really planning to tell Giles off if I died."

"So who's the dove? The slain dove?\" asked Anya, skeptical disappointment etched into her frown.
"They're, uh, not entirely sure. But since it's probably someone historically important whose name means dove, and...armed dove...they think it could be...Colin Powell."

"Well, that's just stupid," said Anya, after a long pause.

"Even I know that's stupid," said Buffy with a look of exaggerated amazement. And then her face scrunched into worry again. "But still: not wanting to die here."

"There's actually more context," said Willow. "Which I, uh, probably should have read first. The passage just before this talks about the armed dove being a 'father of armies' who will become targeted for sacrifice by the 'hooded clans.'"

"Oh thank god," said Xander in a heartfelt tone, adding seriously as everyone looked his way, "Not that I'm happy, of course, no way. But...oh, thank god."

"Yeah," affirmed Willow quietly, feeling a surge of warmth toward Buffy and an equal surge of guilt about her earlier, private snippiness. She gave Buffy a little smile, letting it be an apology for a meanness her friend didn't need to know about.

"Should we let him know, do you think?" asked Anya with abstract worry. "Colin Powell, I mean."

Xander gave her a look. "And he'd listen to us why?"

"We could toss a rock through his window," Anya suggested in a dwindling voice, until she was speaking mostly to herself. "He'd have to pay attention then."

"So," said Spike, cutting flatly through the discussion, "Aside from some bloke taking his final ferry ride, your big prophecy what's got the watchers all in a tizzy boils down to say: darkness rising?" He looked around the table, gave a sharp, short laugh. "Hello? Dark rises like bloody clockwork 'round here."

Xander took a breath. "Gotta go with Spike on this one, Will. I'm not really seeing the big here."

"Well, here's the possible big." Willow touched the screen, marking her place. "Giles says that the Naciran language has about fifty words for 'great darkness', with slightly different meanings--great darkness from below, great darkness from above, great darkness with a side of locusts--but they're also dependent on noun class--there're classes for demon, human, amphibian--and you're probably not interested in all that," she said, catching sight of their expressions, "so I'll just skip right to the point. The word used here isn't really clear, and since that's the important part they're wrangling over the interpretation."


"They think it might mean 'great demon darkness from below that eclipses the sun,'" Willow continued, "Or, 'great demon darkness carried up on a wave of black fire that will enclose the sun.' Or it might mean something else entirely."

"That's still not telling us much," said Buffy, impatience entering her tone.

Tara sent an ironic glance Buffy's way. "Prophets tend to stay vague."

"Lay your bets across the board," agreed Spike with knowing cynicism. "Win, place, or show, and you can still claim you've pegged the horse."

"Well I think we can safely say of both: not good," pointed out Xander.
"This isn't good enough, Will," Buffy said almost on top of Xander's comment, slayer authority infusing her voice with demand. "You need to get us more information. I don't even know why they bothered." She was growing visibly more worked up. "Can this be any more useless? Watch for great darkness. As if that helps us prepare." The sharp blade of her voice was still directed at Willow, and Willow wasn't entirely sure Buffy even saw her anymore or if she was just aiming at what was closest, but it made her face heat.

Spike was eyeing Buffy narrowly but saying nothing.

"Have to say," Buffy went on tightly, "I'm really tired of the Watchers Council giving us the smallest amount of information they can get away with while staying as far away from danger as they can." The words seemed to have burst free from some deeply clenched place.

"I don't think it's like that, Buffy--" Willow began.

"Well, this time they'll have to prove it to me," she interrupted.

And it didn't matter if that made sense or not, did it, thought Willow, because Buffy still ruled the school and school was in session again.

"Hey, Buff." Xander's shoulders had tightened and hunched; there was something half soothing, half warning about his voice and face and eyes. "Relax. We'll get it figured out. I'm sure Giles will do all he can to help."

Buffy stopped and looked around at all of them, and Willow could see her force down her anger, so quickly and thoroughly that almost no trace was left. Give the slayer a magic hat and watch the feelings disappear, she thought with fresh resentment. It had been the Buffy m.o. all summer--to shoot and then vanish--and Willow had hoped she'd return from her trip to find her friend less tightly wound. This latest round of sniper fire said no, and it dug under Willow's skin, stung deeper than it should have. At least an apocalypse-class meltdown would have cleared the air.

"I'm sorry, guys." Buffy met their eyes one by one as if making an effortful point of it, and smiled ruefully and unconvincingly before dropping her gaze. "It's time for my work-out. I just need to let off some stress, and I'll be the tired but much more tolerable Buffy again."

She got up and walked away, leaving behind a heavy silence broken only by Spike's sigh as he rose and followed.

"Good rule of thumb," Spike said, watching her change into her work-out clothes. "Try not to piss off witches, especially ones you want watchin' your back." The smooth bra she wore was like flesh, and his eyes slid over her body in distracted approval.

She turned to glare briefly in his direction--no hiding of feelings from him--then looked away.

"What's that supposed to mean? Will knows I wasn't angry at her." She yanked down her skirt, kicked it across the mat followed by her shoes, and drew on loose sweats before moving to the punching bag and pummeling it bare-fisted.

"Oh, right," he muttered to himself. "Can't miss the obvious, can she." He picked up the wrap and
gloves from a bench and moved to her side. "Here," he said, grabbing one of her hands, making her stop. Annoyance in her face, she tried to shake him off, but he asked her with his eyes to behave and she sighed and let him wrap her hands, twining the cotton from wrist to knuckles.

She fixed her gaze to his slow careful movements, and released a sharp sigh as if his silence provoked her. "I think I'm entitled as much as the next person to an occasional bad mood. I keep my control, you don't even know how well, and I just need to...." She didn't finish the thought. "And, you know, Willow hasn't exactly been Miss Happy Sunshine lately."

Oh, he knew how well. "No one's said you're not entitled, pet." Spike noticed the bruise on her unwrapped wrist, turned her hand back and forth to inspect it, then began massaging the length of her hand gently.

"But you, and let's look at the big vampire you here...you think I was too hard on her, don't you?"
She shook her head. "That irony supplement should keep me going for quite a while."

"Didn't say that, did I?" He stared levelly into her eyes, spoke edgily. "Just said: pissing off a cranky witch ain't all that smart. Be as hard as you have to be, yeah, otherwise you might as well kill the lot of them yourself, quick and merciful." He paused to let that sink in. "But you want to know what you're doin'."

She dropped her gaze, and stared at their hands. "What am I doing?"

"Not for me to say, is it."

Glancing up again, Buffy frowned. "Stop being wise. It's Gilesy and wrong." She frowned even more deeply as he began binding her other hand. "You may want to let up on the Mister Miyagi routine once in a while, too. If you get any more watcher-like I'm going to have to buy you a sweater vest." Words which should have been teasing weren't. Her voice was sour and crabby and Spike imagined he heard a touch of contempt there too.

He glared at her, dropped her hand with a broad gesture. "You want to bash up your pretty knuckles, go right ahead then. Grind 'em down to the bone for all I care." He turned and stalked out.

Sweater vest, he thought, disgusted. Cruel little bitch, when she wanted to be.

He re-entered the front room, brooding about whether to stay or go. The Scoobies were still sitting around as if they'd had their asses nailed to their chairs; a big mass of sulking humanity, vaguely nauseating. He scowled as Xander glanced up, and watched sisterboy's gaze narrow and darken. You almost had to respect that casual, unswerving loathing. Almost.

"What, over that quick?" Xander said mockingly. "Got your daily ration of whup-ass, Spike?"

"My share," Spike said, unruffled, sauntering over and kicking out a chair for himself. No blood at hand, no smoking in the shop. No point to sitting, really, except to tick off the manly daffodil here.

Reason enough.
Willow looked up from her computer, and said with rare solidarity to Spike, "You get a strip torn off your ass too, huh? Lucky you can heal faster." She had witchy snit written all over her, and it wasn't all soft and girlfriendly either; Red wasn't exactly the tender little muffin she'd been a few years ago.

"I'm guessin' that Buffy isn't planning to run for Miss Congeniality anytime soon," said Xander to Willow.

"She's been happily embracing her inner b-word for quite a while now." Willow glared at her computer screen as if it contained Buffy, and Spike could nearly see the smoke coming out of her tiny nostrils. "It's becoming the outer b-word. She wants us to be all 'put-on-a-happy-face' but her not-so-happy face keeps popping out."

Tara quietly got up and left the table, unnoticed by her friends.

"She's been that way since...hmm. What was that thing again?" Xander turned his head to look at Spike. "Oh yeah."

Spike inclined his head, allowed himself a faint half-smile. "Like to think that, wouldn't you. Be a lot easier for you."

"I don't have to think it, I know it." Xander's face hardened. "Ever since you came back, she's been a live round just waiting to go off."

"Right. And that has nothin' to do with you lot givin' her the hairy eyeball every five minutes to see whether she's been corrupted by my big scary evil." Spike edged out a derisive laugh, swept Willow and Xander up in a look. "'Amazin' she hasn't flipped her bleedin' lid under your oh-so-watchful eyes." They exchanged an uneasy glance. Yeah, there you go, thought Spike maliciously. God, it felt good to get a few rips in. This was nearly as fun as thrashing it out with his slayer. "You're the ones can't hack it. Goin' all beetle-browed and weepy every time she says a sharp word. Gettin' your knickers in a twist 'cause she's got the same needs you do."

A spasm of disgust crossed Xander's face, erasing his doubt. "Need? You're not a need, Spike. You're a toy." He leaned in, cracked a mean laugh. "You're her sex-bot and punching bag. And the sad thing is? You don't even care. You don't have the pride to walk away."

Spike twisted his lips slightly in irony. He knew she'd been less than forthcoming. When they'd first found out about him, she'd acknowledged his punishment in so many words. How's that medicine taste? she'd asked coolly. It had tasted like hell. But he'd taken it. This go-round he'd thought it might be different, but she still played it off to her friends like he was a convenience, claiming this time it was for his own safety. If they thought I cared even an ounce, even for a moment, you'd be dust, Spike, a bag of ashes I take out of my sock drawer every once in a while to look at. An ounce. A moment. Sometimes he wondered if that were the extent of it. Maybe she didn't lie to her friends. Maybe she lied to herself, to him.

He'd been a man of infinite patience with Dru, who loved him madly. With Buffy, his humiliation was infinite, his patience rather less so. Once upon a time he'd have snapped the poof's neck for his insolence without even bothering to drink. Now he could only say through a tight mask of calm,

"Maybe not. But at least I know what I get out of the deal. And what she gets."

"Meaning?" asked Xander in a sharp voice.

"Oh, give it a think," Spike said, staring him down. "I'm sure it'll come to you." He looked at them
again, twisted the knife. "Besides, get a kick watchin' you lot strain your stitches bein' polite to me while she's around. Sat you down, I hear, told you to play nice. All Happy Families, and don't kick the Spike." He paused. "Course, you still get your kicks, but we don't tattle, do we." His lips curled in satisfaction as their angry expressions became edged with guilt. "Seems like the Slayer's not the only one has trouble keepin' a lid on."

Dawn looked up from her magazine as the front door opened. She'd already heard the laughter and conversation of Willow and Tara through the open window as they came up the front walk. When they entered Dawn saw they were holding ice creams. That'll teach me to take a pass on the magic the gathering, she thought wistfully, then eyed the two women in critical interest, noticing Willow's arm around Tara's waist and the way their hips were getting all happy-bumpy with each other. A small glow of contentment lit inside her.

"Dawnie." Tara smiled in surprise. "Hey! How was your trip?" She came to sit on the couch, and Willow sat sideways on the far end, legs pulled up, licking her ice cream lazily and listening with her open face.

"It was cool. We went to Haight-Ashbury and Chinatown and Fisherman's Wharf and ate two shrimp cocktails each with these fat shrimp, big as kittens. And, oh, we saw a clown who made naughty balloons and this one guy leading another guy around on a leash. He was naked. Well, except for the collar. And this lee-tle bit of leather," she added, pinching her fingers close.

Tara, mid-slurp of ice cream, made a small choking sound, and then cleared her throat. "Wow. That's. Wow."

Willow was grinning. "That's so cool. Did you see any drag queens?"

Tara was looking shocked, and Dawn giggled. "Oh, yeah. This one guy was dressed up like Bjork and wearing a swan dress, just standing out there on the street waiting for a bus--Kerry actually thought he was Bjork at first and asked for her autograph." Dawn rolled her eyes. "Like you'd go around wearing a swan for everyday. Well, except for this guy did." She frowned.

"It sounds like quite a--an adventure," said Tara, looking over at Willow.

Dawn could tell she was a bit wigged. "Hey, seventeen years old," she reminded them with a hand wave. "Living on the Hellmouth. Big gay love on my couch here."

"Oh my," said Tara, and her mouth hung open as if to say something more but she'd apparently gone speechless.

"I'm just saying," Dawn said dryly. "You guys need to stop acting all freaked whenever I do grown-up stuff."

But she snuck a glance at Willow, who didn't look at all freaked, and who tipped her the wink behind Tara's back and smiled like a cat around her ice cream.

"You're right," said Tara, pulling herself together. "You're absolutely right, Dawn. We--we do. It's just hard, thinking of you all grown up." She smiled and touched Dawn's knee, tipping her head
with her sweet smile that made Dawn feel all mushy-sisterly, like she so rarely did with Buffy anymore. It was easier to be a sister to someone who didn't act like your mom.

She ducked her head, shoulders sloping awkwardly as she tried to let Tara's warmth roll off like water down a duck's back and not make her goofy, because that would be embarrassing when she'd just made a point of owning her seventeen-year-old-hood.

"So, um, what's the monster of the week? Blood-sucking banshee from outer space--mummy cannibal helldog--angry skull-faced demon guy?"

They made up some lameness that they thought it was safe for her to hear, and she listened and asked questions and translated to herself the careful words they used. "Portents aren't really clear" meant some big-ass heap of hell they didn't know how to handle yet. "A little upset" meant her sister was being a bitch and a half. " Wanted to work out for a while" meant wild wrestling sex with a vampire on gym mats. And "It's all good" with that strained little smile of Willow's meant it was probably all bad, in some secret way they thought she wasn't ready to know because she was forever and always the kid sister.

But they were sitting on the couch, Willow and Tara, their knees almost touching; and they had ice cream. And Dawn willed her translation of that to be true. She wanted this to be the world she knew, a world of kissing knees and ice cream, where the good guys stayed together.

"Is Tara sleeping over?" she asked Willow when Tara went off to the kitchen to make herself a sandwich.

"Yeah." Willow smiled. "I think so."

"Things seem good with the two of you," said Dawn hopefully, fishing a bit. And with the less drinking, she didn't say, and the other old, bad stuff that everyone tried to talk around. "Ever since you got back from Taos, you guys have been making with the cuddly again."

"Well, it was good for us to get away for a while. Together. And, you know, uh, one day at a time." Willow glanced toward the back of the house before changing the subject. "Hey, what about you. How's College Boy? Is the lovey-dovey stuff holding up over the long distance?"

"I thought he'd write letters, real letters on paper. Send a picture of his dorm, say romantic stuff 'cause we were apart. But he only writes e-mails and he won't even capitalize," Dawn grumbled. "And he never says anything romantic. Just talks about the quad and the creamery all the places he hangs out with his new friends. I can't ever get him on the phone."

Willow made a sympathy face. "Aw, DAWNIE. I'm sorry. He's probably just getting settled right now, though. Once it slows down the missin'll set in, and that phone'll be glued to his hand. Or, better, his ear--or, you know, he'll get that whole hand-ear-mouth thing goin', which'd probably work out best."

"It's okay, Willow." Dawn shrugged with her face. "I know he's probably got some skeezy ho already who's putting out and doing jello shots with him and talking about Karl Marx. And he'll come back scruffy with an earring and a loser goatee and he'll be all, 'Hey, Dawn' and I'll be all, 'Whatever, Simon.' And he'll want to talk but I'll just blow him off--" She lifted her chin with a flounce of indifference. "--'cause I've moved on and he's got herpes and is flunking out of all his classes."

"Dawn, hey," said Willow admiringly. "Look at you. You skipped over the chocolate binge and the Tori Amos wallow and went right to the being-over-him coolness."
Dawn smiled modestly. "Well, I am wise beyond my years. It's that ex-key thing I've got goin' on. Someday they'll make a TV movie about me."

Crickets chirped, cars whooshed softly past on the nearest street, and the night breeze made the trees murmur. Somewhere, a dog barked.

Two figures staggered through the gates and came to a halt under the wide canopy of a maple. One fell backwards to stand against its trunk, gave a tired groan, and lit an old-fashioned pipe with trembling fingers. The other figure hunched furtively close to his friend, peering across the cemetery.

"I'm wiped. This is, like..." The pipe-smoker, Egon, struggled with the demands of language and memory and simple math. "...the fifth cemetery."

"That's her." Roph squinted at where a small blonde girl was fighting off a matronly vamp. The vamp wore a blue polka-dotted dress, short heels, and pearls; the girl wasn't wearing much of anything.

Egon raised his eyes and slowly brought them into focus. "You sure?" he asked dubiously. "She's nothin' but a bitty thing." He contemplated the violent scene. "Cute, though. Kinda reminds me of Charlene, before she blew up."

"That's her. Who else's it gonna be?"

"Well, could be..." Egon paused as he considered the alternatives, and the pause became a period by default as his eyes slowly fell shut. After half a minute they jerked open again. "What? What?" he muttered in alarm, looking around and sniffing. "Nah, man," he said, not speaking to Roph, glaring instead at a pocket of empty air located slightly to the left of him. "Leave me alone. I ain't carryin' no rhino. That stuff's unwholesome."

"Mama's got game," Roph said, raising his Polaroid for a snapshot as the matronly vampire kicked the girl back a few feet. "My mama used to kick the crap outta me like that." He stuck the undeveloped photo in his pocket, and a gloomy look crossed his face. "Aw, man, I'm missin' my mama. We gotta go visit her after this."

Egon took another deep toke of his jackweed and blew it out, nodding deeply. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah." He slowly lifted one hand, paused to stare at it suspiciously as if unsure who it belonged to or what it was doing there, then allowed it to rise further and scratch the base of his tentacles. "Who?"

"My mama."

"Right on." Egon reflected on his response, smoking and brooding, then shook his head with regret. "Nah, Roph. I don't think she wants to see me again. She wasn't too happy last time we stayed. Always on my case, naggin' and snipin' and stickin' that knife in my ear."

"Dude, you killed her litter."
"Dude, she had them in the fridge. I coulda sworn they were burritos. Looked like burritos. Tasted like...hey, we should get some burritos after this. You think they got a Taco Bell here?" Each word Egon spoke was drawn out unhurriedly. "'Cause burritos. Man. With hot sauce. You eat a burrito, the world's a burrito. You are the bean. You are the bean. You are the cheese, man. It's...Sacramento."

"Six little brothers. I was gonna teach 'em ultimate frisbee. Mama was gonna get a bigger trailer. Gotta expect the smackdown for that." Roph shook his head mournfully, sending thick gobbets of slime across Egon's face.

"Watch it," Egon said without heat. "That's disgusting. I been tellin' you--when you gonna get some ointment?" He tried to pull some slime from his face but the thick strand adhered and hung between skin and hand like pizza cheese. Losing interest and focus, he gave up his effort and stared heavily for several seconds, hacking and painful sounds that sawed across the quiet graveyard.

"She's a bitty thing," he finally wheezed in the direction of the ground.

"Okay, okay, now--come on," Roph said urgently as the vamp became a puff of dust. He grabbed Egon's arm and pulled him staggering forward. "Before she gets away."

"What," muttered Buffy, leaning over with hands on her knees. "You couldn't take up garden club, lady--maybe some comfortable knitting? No, you had to go in for midlife kick-boxing." She slowly straightened, and as she did saw two demons shambling toward her, one with a big squidlike head, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and rough cut-offs and trying to puff on a pipe, but unable to bring hand to mouth while coordinating the stumbling movements of his legs. The other demon's scalp oozed slime, which had dribbled down to coat his Grateful Dead tee-shirt in long, grey strands, like candle wax around a wine bottle. He wore tiny John Lennon glasses, and a slime-covered camera hung from a strap around his neck.

"What have we here?" she asked as the two demons approached. "Round two?" She tightened her hand around her stake.

"Whoa, chill," said the slimy one, coming to a halt and letting go of his friend. He held out two hands in a placating way. His friend lurched to a halt and swayed in place.

"Hey...hey...hey..." said the squidy one slowly, then took a deep breath and paused, gesturing with his motionless pipe as if about to add something. Buffy waited, eyebrows rising higher as the seconds passed. It was like waiting for light to reach earth from a distant star. Squid finally blinked, said: "Hey, girl...now...easy there."

Buffy rolled her eyes and lowered her stake a notch. Cheech and Chong here were so baked they'd probably have trouble hitting a dead frog with a dissection knife. "Can I help you?" she asked, voice dry with skepticism.

"You're the slayer, right?" asked Slime, then added with obvious capitalization: "The Slayer?"

"That's me."
"Dude," said Slime, turning to his friend with something like reverence. "I told you."

"You're a bitty thing," Squid said to her, frowning critically as he puffed.

Buffy coughed as the smell hit her. "God, what is that?"


"That stuff goes to eleven, man," said Slime approvingly.

"No--no thanks." Buffy turned her head, waving her hand in front of her face to clear the air. Small coughs kept breaking from her throat. "It smells like burning rubber. And," she realized, "raspberries?"

"Yeah, good stuff," said Slime fondly. "Hey," he began patting and digging at his pockets, "listen, I know you're like, real busy, and we don't want to take up your time."

"Your time," repeated Squid, nodding. He pointed his pipe in her direction, prompting another round of hand fanning. "'Cause that's valuable. You can't get that back. Once it's gone...." He let that thought trail off, still nodding his head in slow, sage motion.

"Uh huh." Buffy eyed the offending pipe. "Do you think you could point that thing elsewhere, or maybe put it out?" she asked.

The squid demon apologized profusely and made a great show of knocking the pipe out on the bottom of one shoe, an unbalancing act which took nearly a full minute and threatened to pitch him over onto the ground at any moment. Successful at last, he looked around for a place to put the remnants, as if there might be an ashtray nearby just out of reach, and eventually slipped the mess into one pocket.

Slime, like Buffy, had been so mesmerized by this balletic performance that it had interrupted whatever spiel he'd had prepared. But once it was over, he held out a somewhat goo-crusted book to her. He seemed to expect her to take it without explanation.

"What's that?" Buffy asked warily.

"Autograph," said Slime. "For my collection."

"Autograph?" she said, disbelieving. Could the Hellmouth get any more surreal? She took the book between two fingers, saw the slime was dried, and opened it with care. The sticky pages had to be pulled apart. "Jim Carrey," she read, flipping forward one page at a time. "Howard Stern, Jennifer Love Hewitt, Chevy Chase...Celine Dion?" She looked up from the book. "And tell me again how I know I'm not signing my soul over to Satan here?"

"Aw, no way, no way." Slime shook his head earnestly, wet gobbets flying out onto the grass. "Nothin' like that." He gazed at her with doglike eyes, and when Buffy realized he was going to say no more, she sighed and slid out the tiny pen. What the hell, she thought.

"Write, 'to Roph with love'."

"And Egon," said Egon.

"This better not end up on eBay," said Buffy, scribbling out the dedication and feeling increasingly
irritable.


She turned and walked away, leaving the demons in a huddle examining her signature. "Beauty, man, beauty," she heard Egon say. And then, after a moment: "Hey...who was that?"

Errands done, Spike went for a stroll. He didn't like for Buffy to patrol alone. He was always there for her; it was a point of pride. Well, except when they were fighting up a storm. Or she blew him off. Once in a while, a poker game down at Willy's came up that couldn't be missed; a presence had to be maintained, after all. And sometimes you got lucky with a damn good flick on the telly, even without cable.

He didn't let her patrol alone much.

Spike found Buffy in the third graveyard he tried, mid-fight with a pair of trendy new vamps in Armani who'd probably been turned on the way home from a gallery opening, chablis and brie on their final breaths. He flew across the dew-wet grass to her side and grabbed the closest one of the pair, game facing and tossing the bastard against a tall tombstone. The vamp snarled and lurched forward, baby-wild and baby-strong. Hellmouth mojo had a way of making them half-crazy when they sprouted, something in the earth, seeping up from below. As Spike punched and kicked the vamp into meat for the sheer bloody pleasure of it, he thought back to his own turning; contempt fueled his fight. He'd hadn't risen as dirt-stupid as these Sunnydale hatchlings. There'd been artistry to his early kills. A touch of class.

He turned and back-kicked the vamp across another grave marker, watching as his opponent tumbled flat, then pulling out his stake to finish it.

Yeah, Spike thought, leaping on the fellow's prone form, he'd killed a lot; many nights he'd gorged himself and fed the Thames with floaters, like empty wine bottles on her waves. But he'd killed well.

With a surge of strength the vamp shouldered him off, and Spike rolled away and came up again ready.

He'd drained cool ladies and left them draped over their parlor chairs, fans still in hand, looking asleep. He'd killed tots and toffs and ragged tramps, dismantling his kill with a passion to learn every nuance of his newfound hunger. He'd studied his prey down to the gristle and grey matter, stalked and struck like a dark shadow; he'd been better at what he did than the Ripper and--not that he liked to brag--but he'd dispatched far more lovelies than that rank amateur, with a flair for details even the gutter press wouldn't print. Like old Jack, though, he'd never been caught.

Kids today, he thought, backhanding the increasingly sluggish vampire in front of him.

"You're a sad specimen, mate," said Spike, landing a punch to the side of its head. He danced in
place, not bothering to drive the stake home yet. "Crawl out of the earth, see a slayer, go for that sweet bit of throat. 'S like takin' a poison chocolate." He knocked the creature's legs out from under it then kicked it repeatedly. "Should have run," he sneered, his blood firing with the exertion of boot meeting soft flesh. "No survival instinct, there's your problem."

The vamp growled and toppled him with one hand, and tried to mount him for the bite. It was funny as hell, in its way, and Spike laughed as he shoved it off. Poor wanker probably had no brain left after its autopsy to think with, or else it'd been shoved back in like a handful of soggy pate; it was no bloody wonder these Sunnydale babes came back half zombie, witlessly seeking their first meal from a slayer or one of their own.

Out of the corner of his eye Spike could see Buffy wearing down her vamp, whose chic black dress and sheer hose were looking worse for wear. His slayer hadn't been hurrying much, from what he could tell. Lady vamp had become a well-chewed cat-toy. Spike's lips curled back in a grin, which became bloodied as a fist crashed into his face.

Hell, enough of that. Fun over. Spike rose, lifting the vamp by its neck, and swung it around for the kill just as Buffy set up hers. Shoved back to back, the vamps bumped into each other and then stiffened as stakes were driven home simultaneously through their chests. They dissipated in a fine hail of ash, mingling on the turf in a final marriage bed and leaving Spike and Buffy staring at each other.

Buffy was panting, cheeks flushed and eyes demented, and Spike felt fire begin as a prickling in his scalp to sweep down through his body. His demon face was a rigid mask, fixed by unsated hunger. He dropped his stake as she dropped hers, and he lifted and shoved her back onto the tombstone behind her, a table tomb on which an angel knelt watchfully. Bottom against its edge, she wrapped her arms through the angel's to anchor herself and arched back, legs coming up to wrap around him in a powerful knot.

Spike gasped raggedly, her scent flooding him, and unzipped himself with shaking fingers. He pushed up her skirt, ripped her knickers off--she bought them thin as gossamer for just these moments, no other explanation--and a sob caught in his aching throat as he shoved inside her. Slick heat kissed his flesh. He grabbed her ass and pulled her further off the tomb, pumping in sharply as she writhed on the cold marble.

"Oh, god," he said, the words low and hard like suffering, "Oh, god, Buffy."

Her breathy sounds rose higher and her entire body twisted around him, a braid of legs, a long, deep swallow around his throbbing prick.

"Oh. Bloody. Hell." He shuddered, holding himself back for her, every muscle in his body coiling more and more tightly, a sweet pain. And...oh bloody hell. He caught sight of movement to one side, across the grass. Another new vamp, young punk, nearing with feral interest at the sight of vamp plowing slayer across a tombstone.

Spike lowered his head and growled to warn the other away. "Sod off," he said. Any vamp with manners or sense should know better than to interrupt an elder. "I don't share my dinner." The vamp slunk closer, though, a smile spreading nastily across its face, and Spike realized he was going to have to kill it. Swearing, he tried to pull free, but Buffy clamped down tightly and he felt every atom of focus in his body drop abruptly to his balls. He turned his gaze back down to his fiery beauty, groaning at the distraction, he wasn't sure which.

"Love...not a good moment, I know...but...oh..." He shuddered, eyes falling shut. "Slayer."
She was arching and digging her heels into the small of his back, and Spike lifted his chin and swallowed down groans as stars flared behind his closed eyelids. Danger washed his veins with the clarity of awareness, a lightning arc bringing his desire to a high, mad edge he hadn't felt since Dru, since sex and mayhem at Altamont, or the time they'd fed at an all-night diner, rutting against the counter under the hard fluorescent lights, blood dripping from the edge in the silence, with whole families looking on, crammed into their booths, motionless in terror.

"Yes," Spike gasped, dizzied with blood-lust and awe and a love so strong he'd have killed anyone at that moment, killed anyone for his slayer, no matter how devastating the pain. He drove into her more deeply, savage strokes, and she cried out in ecstasy as the vamp reached them, as Spike reached out and crushed its neck and lifted it up off the ground. The creature clawed ineffectualy at its own throat to break his grip, and her body was pulsing around his, and Spike shoved his hips forward with powerful stabs, there, there, there, not knowing if he said the words aloud, and then he tipped his throat back, giving a harsh, guttural cry of wonder as he broke inside her.

When he finished, he had to dust the vamp. It was a messy and annoying interruption to his afterglow, not to mention that his bits were waving about in the breeze. But he made it quick, and then grimaced as he stood, zipping up and wiping ash off his coat.

Buffy was sitting on the edge of the tomb, legs crossed demurely, watching him with a small, sly smile.

"You're a mad bitch," he said, admiring and a bit bemused, coming up and pushing her legs apart to stand against her for a kiss. He trailed his hands up her sides and kissed her slowly, and she draped her arms across her shoulders and rubbed her breasts against his chest. Hell, yeah, he thought. It got no better than this.

"Mm," she said, breaking away. And she moved her tongue around her teeth and lips with a smile and kissed him again, and as their mouths married, Spike realized with shock that she was tasting his own blood.

Another day, thought Buffy, waking up Tuesday morning to the feel of warm sunshine on her face and birds chirping. She could hear Dawn in her room, singing along to the radio; Willow in the bathroom giggling with Tara. Her household was filled with girlish sweetness and light, and it was making her unbearably disgusted. She lay on her bed, steeped in the foulness of her mood, then sat up against her headboard and looked around at all her things. Furniture she'd had since she was thirteen; a lame sprawl of stuffed animals; clothes hanging in the open closet that said, "Hi, I'm a flighty little flirt with tits, wanna see?" It was all a big pile of wrong; the walls too close, the ceiling smotheringly low. And here was a question: why was she even in this tacky, tiny bedroom? Why wasn't she across the hall in her
mom's old room--it was her house now, after all. She could claim the larger bed and the airier space, and who would dare argue with her about it? It would be claiming her adulthood along with it, too, because it was--it was like a symbol of something. Of everything. Her mom's room, her mom's bed.

Buffy gazed down her comforter toward the lumps of her toes, as the lilting song stylings of the littlest Summers continued to drift in.

Well, if I'm here I might as well stay here, she thought to herself darkly. No reason to get up, no reason to go into the shop. It wasn't like she had to work, when you really got down to it. In fact, she didn't have to do anything, she realized. She'd just stay here in her tiny bed, sleep a few more hours, and for breakfast...Nutter Butters and Diet Sprite. Later, in pajamas, she'd check out the Lifetime channel, see if there were any movies on, maybe one about a divorced woman getting stalked by a violently drunken ex-cop with a cold yet needy wife and rebellious teenage son on the brink of suicide because his underage girlfriend had gotten pregnant before falling into a coma.

A knock came on the door. "Buffy?" Willow poked her head around, smiled. "Hey, just wanted to let you know we're dropping Dawn off at school."

"Great," said Buffy lazily, arms crossed. Willow was wearing a pink sweater with flowers down one shoulder. Pink was so not her color. Not that pink, anyway, not with this new shade of red hair. Was she blind? Had she maybe gone color-blind from some spell? Buffy considered asking her this, just to see her face go all big-eyed and open-mouthed, to see if she could make that old stutter reappear. "So you don't need me for anything."

Willow hesitated, as if trying to figure out an implication in the words. "Well, not this morning." Her smile picked up a bit. "You can stay in bed, if you want. Sleep in. I know you were out patrolling late last night."

Oh, now that was loaded, thought Buffy. No missing that accusing look, no matter how faintly it was shadowed by her way-too-desert-rouge eyelids. "I did dust some vamps," she said. "Five."

"Hey, that's great--"

"But then I spent the rest of the night having sex with Spike. First on a tomb in the middle of the cemetery, then in his crypt. On the bed, to be exact. Well, and then the floor, and the table, and up against the wall. A buncha different ways too," she said brightly. "I swear, I was grinding all over his cold, hard--"

"Buffy!" said Willow. Score one for Buffy: widened eyes, hanging mouth--just briefly, though, and then Willow pressed her lips together, eyes flashing. "Gotta say: too much information."

"Really?" Buffy feigned surprise. "Too much information for you?" She stared blandly at her frowny friend, then parroted in a soft voice: "Oh, oh...oh, Tara...oh, oh, baby."

Willow gasped and color sprung up in her cheeks. Now we have the full effect, Buffy thought with satisfaction: the stunned and parted lips, the horror. "Why--why--why didn't you s-say something, Buffy? God, we would have, would have--" And then, as Buffy continued staring back with arms folded, Willow turned and fled.

"It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood," said Buffy, staring expressionlessly out her window.
Xander pulled his truck up to the curb in front of the Magic Box with a screech and felt the front wheel bounce as it rolled up onto the curb. Leaping out--nearly falling out--he stumbled around the cab with his baseball bat in hand, just as Anya rushed out the front door in a jangle of bells to meet him. Still running on instinct, he nearly tried to shove by her, but she clung, and he made himself very sensibly stop, holding her tightly with one arm and turning a little so that she wasn't so close to the door.

"An, I thought I told you to get the hell out of there."

"Well, I couldn't leave the shop," she said anxiously. "People expect us to be open and it's not right to close in the middle of the day. It would set a bad precedent and undermine our growing reputation for reliability." She pressed her cheek to his chest and shivered. "Oh, Xander, it's been awful, awful."

"Okay, easy. Just tell me what it is," he said, "So I can figure out what we have to do and whether we need to call Willow."

"What what is?" Anya said, looking up with her brow in a puckered frown of incomprehension.

Xander shook his head once to get the duh out, and stared at her. "The thing in the shop," he said. "What is it--a poltergeist? A ghost? One of those grey things that drip seawater and smell like old cod?"

"Hefhaints," she said.

"Wait--so it's one of those?" he said, surprised and rather alarmed at having hit the mark.

"Is what one of those?" She shoved away in exasperation. "What are you talking about? Are you purposely trying to confuse me?"

Xander lowered his bat to the sidewalk and leaned one hand on it. He set his face into firm, yet loving lines. "An, why don't you...tell me why I'm here."

"To help get her out of the shop." Anya's brows drew up and together as if the pressure were forcing an internal cork to rise. "Xander, she's been here for hours. Scaring away the customers, saying horrible and inappropriate things to them." Her curls bobbed with outrage. "They're not spending any money and some of them are never coming back, including Mister Chapman, that nice old man who's been trying for years to raise the spirit of Sabnock the Truculent. He spends money, Xander, lots of it. But not anymore--she called him a weasely little pippin with delusions of grandeur and told him his sweater was stinky. I don't even know what a pippin is," she said, giving him an imploring gaze. "Do you?"

"No. No, I don't." He squeezed her shoulder, and let it go. "I'm just going to go inside now and see what's what." Given that whatever lurked inside seemed to be sticking to harsh language, he offered Anya the bat, but she pushed it back into his hands.

"No, you may need it. You know how strong she is."

"R-i-i-ight."

He open the door and peered around its edge, scanning the shop's interior. He saw nothing at first, then Buffy walked across the shop holding a book. "Buffy," he called in relief. She looked up, gave
him a dismissive once over, and kept walking. "Okay," he said.

"Did you see her?" Anya whispered at his shoulder.

Xander pulled his head back out. He had to ask it and he knew he'd regret it one way or the other, no matter what the answer. "Anya, have you been talking about Buffy? Buffy's been in the shop, Buffy's been saying inappropriate things to customers?" Please tell me no, he thought. Let it be a nice, easy poltergeist.

"Yes, Buffy. Didn't I tell you that on the phone?"

"No. I think I would have remembered that."

"She was late for work, and I called her and she said she wasn't coming." Anya folded her arms and rubbed one elbow with nervous energy. "Then she showed up and was quite snippy, let me tell you. She sulked and sat around on her duff, and when I tried to get her to work, she told me to stick my head in my mop bucket and give my hair a good wring. To get this bad perm out, she said." Anya touched her hair self-consciously. "The box said that the product would create a natural, beautiful wave. I really don't think she knows what she's talking about."

"I'm sure she doesn't." Xander tossed the bat back through the open window of his truck and then went in, Anya at his heels like a shadow, one hand on his upper back, the other on his arm. He felt manly--yes, he was the man--and at the same time he was the nervous man.

"Yo, Buff," he called. She was sitting at the table, face in her hands, elbows on either side of a big book he recognized from previous boring afternoons as being fairly explicit on the sexual and social characteristics of demon races. She was wearing a plaid flannel shirt he'd never seen her wear before, the sleeves rolled up, and a tight tee-shirt underneath that appeared to be decorated with pictures of Care Bears; she had no make-up on and her hair was the closest it had probably ever been to bed head.

Xander detached himself from Anya and eased up to the table. "Hey," he said, knocking on its surface to draw her attention to him. She didn't raise her face from her hands, merely tipped her face up and looked at him. "How's it goin'?" he asked, smiling, trying to dig in behind her blank eyes with his own steady ones.

"Go away," she said, and returned to her book.

Xander glanced sideways at Anya, who made a face as if to say, 'You see?'

He sat down and placed his hands on the table, then beat his palms against the top a few times for a nice little drum roll. Thump, thudda-dump. Thump, thudda-dump. He got a good rhythm going, letting it distract him, and finished a minute later with a rousing crash of air cymbals. Buffy was staring at him now all right, in the way that a shoe might stare at a bug.

"So, hey," he said as if just catching sight of her for the first time. "How's it goin', Buff?" He stared at her more gently, lowered his voice. "What's going on? Is it Dawn? Did you guys have a fight?"

"Nothing's wrong with her," Anya said helpfully. "I asked. She's simply being a bitch."

"Anya." Xander gave her a pointed stare. "Why don't you go...over there?" Jerked his head in a way he hoped was meaningful. She turned without a further word and left, and he looked back to Buffy, who was ignoring him again.

"So, Buff," he began.
"Stop saying that," she said, looking up at him dangerously. "I swear, Xan, if you say my name like that one more time I'm going to rip your tongue out and make it a bow-tie."

"Heh," he said, smiling in an unnerved way. "Just like in the cartoons."

"Only more bloody," she promised.

"I'm just going to leave you alone now with your...book," he said, smiling at the nice doggy with the big teeth, as he got up and backed away from the table slowly. "I'll be over here," he added, waving at the far side of the shop and then going over to where Anya waited.

"See?" she whispered.

"Call Willow," he said quietly. "Call her now."

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"She's inside?" said Willow, sounding as uneasy as Xander felt. The four of them stood on the sidewalk in front of the store. Inside lurked the Buffy monster, armored in flannel and armed with scathing wit. It would have been a ridiculous moment, if they hadn't all been so worried.

"Maybe she's possessed," said Tara. "Has she done anything supernatural--spoken in tongues, levitated? Projectile vomited?" Her tone was serious and intense, like that of a doctor making a bedside assessment.

"No," said Xander, looking to Anya.


"You don't think," said Xander, hesitating, his voice lowering. "You don't think it's like when she came back?" He didn't have to say from where. "I mean, maybe that's not even her."

"I think it's her," said Anya. "I mean, she's corporeal." She shrugged up one shoulder. "She's been drinking coffee. Quite a lot, actually."

"Hey, maybe she's just over-caffeinated," said Xander hopefully, then watched that suggestion fall deservedly flat. "Well, at least it's not beer."

"She was different this morning too," said Willow quietly, glancing up then down again. "I thought it was just a time-of-the-month thing. Like, a terminal case."

"What happened?" Xander asked.

"It's not important."

"How do you know?"

Willow eyeballed Xander with glinty little eyes in a way that told him to shut the hell up now, and he obliged with zipped lips and a short nod. "Someone needs to talk to her," Willow said, looking
around the group.

"I have talked to her," Anya reminded them, raising her hand when no one spoke right away. "I would prefer not to do that again."

"Guess it'll be me, then," Willow said, a slight edge to her voice.

"We'll all go," said Tara quickly, touching her arm.

"Four against one," muttered Xander. "I'm liking those odds better."

She was still sitting there, but she was watching them approach. She certainly looked like the normal Buffy. Xander's eyes lowered to the faded Care Bears tee-shirt stretched tight across her breasts. Almost the normal Buffy, he amended, then raised his eyes in alarm as she said,

"Got a good look at those, Xan? Want me to tear off my shirt and give you a perv-eye view?"

"What?" he yelped, and quickly slung a glance at Anya, who was staring at him with lips parted in a silent circle of hurt. "What? No! What are you talking about?"

"You a breast man, Xan? I'm thinking you must be, the way you eat up the girl candy with those big eyes of yours. Got a thing for their gumballs, dontcha?" She was leaning back in her chair, chest thrust out, smirking at him. Smirking.

Oh dear lord, he thought. "It's F-f-faith," he said, pointing as the thought hit him like a big, heavy freight train. He turned to the others, begging them to see it. "Faith, in Buffy's body."

"That's so s-s-s-sad," Buffy said, mimicking him. "Hey--when a thought strikes you, and no one can hear, does it make a sound?"

"I don't think that's Faith," Willow said slowly.

"No." Buffy shook her head: "Not Faith." She nodded and pointed to herself: "Buffy. Now give yourself a cookie."

Tara stepped forward, smiling nervously. "Buffy, you know us, right? We're your friends. We want to help."

"My friends," said Buffy, standing. Everyone moved a step back at the same time. She walked around the table and hopped up on it; then laughed as she swung her feet. "My good, good old friends." Her lips pressed together thoughtfully and her brow furrowed as she said, "Hm. Yes, I think I do know you." She pointed at them in turn. At Anya, speaking brightly: "If I only had a brain." At Tara, sorrowfully: "If I only had a heart." At Xander, pouting minxishly: "If I only had the nerve." And then, swinging her gaze to Willow to finish with the falsest surprise and cheer: "And hey, here's the wicked witch!"

Xander's throat caught at the offhand cruelty, as next to him Willow stiffened. He could feel her pain like a punch in his own gut. "What the hell is the matter with you?" he asked Buffy roughly. She pulled another exaggerated pout as answer.
"Xander, it's okay," said Willow, touching his arm lightly, but as if to reassure herself, not him. "Something's not right. Buffy wouldn't act like this. Maybe it's magical, maybe some--some kind of drug. I don't know."

"Or, gee, maybe," said Buffy, "I'm just having a bad day." She hopped down off the table, and they parted widely for her as she walked through them. She paced the room. "Because, see, I can have a bad day. Oh, I can have a bad day."

"S-sure, Buffy," said Tara in an understanding voice. "We all have bad days."

Buffy turned, hands tucked in her back pockets. "Oh, Tara. You're so sweet. You know what you're like?" She tipped her head, her expression laced with soft, fake kindness. "You're like the saccharine in the black coffee of my life."

Tara ducked her head, discomfort enfolding her body.

"She's been saying things like this all day," said Anya in a matter-of-fact tone. "It was refreshing at first, but then it became annoying and ultimately I wanted to strangle her."

Buffy shook her head. "Letting that one go. Way too easy."

"We need to get more information," murmured Willow, turning to Xander. "But I don't think she's feeling too--"

"Hey," said Buffy, sauntering up into their personal space. "You talking about me? Gee, there's a surprise." Cool sarcasm edged her voice.

Willow frowned and visibly steeled herself not to back away. "Buffy, um, do you remember anything about last night?"

"Oh, yeah." Buffy cracked a wide smile.

"Not that," Willow said hastily. Xander raised his brows and looked between the two of them. "I mean, anything else strange like, like maybe magical or some kind of drug?"

"Well, let's see." Buffy matched Willow's frown. "There was a big warlock who asked me if I wanted to see his etchings, and we went back to his place and then everything got kind of fuzzy and next thing I knew I woke up outside in the street and my clothes were on inside out. Do you mean like that?"

Willow made an exasperated face, as Anya brightened and said, "Oh! That must be it! Now we just have to find the warlock." She smiled at them all with relief.

"If I only had a brain," sang Buffy earnestly, twirling away from Willow and dancing with herself. The smile slid off Anya's face. "Okay, I realize now that was sarcasm."

"Anya isn't stupid," Xander grated at Buffy, pissed off enough that he couldn't hold his tongue, even though he knew this wasn't the real, with-it version of the friend he knew. "She's literal, sure, but not--"

"If I only had the nerve," sang Buffy.

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?" He held up a finger and mentally kicked himself. "No. Wait. Forget I asked," he said tightly.
"Why, Xan." She stopped and put her hands on her hips, head cocked like a delicate bird's. "I forgot you asked a long, long time ago. The problem is, you can't forget that you asked. And that I said no. Poor Xander." She mocked him with every inch of her body. "If you'd only had the nerve to take what you wanted, maybe you'd have had a different answer." She paused, letting that sink in. "Then again, not a chance. You could never take what you wanted from me. I'd lay you flat with one punch." She smirked.

He stared at her, this cruel unBuffy, feeling anger stir that wasn't quite like any anger he'd felt before. Not toward her. God help him, he wanted to belt her, he really did, and he realized he'd made a fist only as Anya came quietly up next to him and took it in her hands and eased it open. He took a deep careful breath, and let it out.

Buffy saw this, her eyes flickering down then back up to his face. "Whoa," she laughed. "You want to try and take me? Really?" She was making a little-old-me? face. "Hey. Bring it on." She subtly changed her stance and man, oh man, thought Xander, that did not look good. "Take me. If you can." Double meanings made her words even heavier.

"I'm not fighting you," Xander said in a clear voice. "Because a, I don't want to; and b, I'd die." Anya was gripping his hand so tightly between hers it was going numb.

"That's right," she said. "Except for the wanting-to part, because you know you so want to." She swayed toward him sinuously, and Xander could feel the tension around him rising as Anya pressed closer and Willow and Tara eased in to flank him, a shield of womanliness that he did not deserve and felt deeply grateful for.

"Buffy," he said firmly, buoyed by his girl posse, "take it easy."

She punched him and he fell, hearing Willow and Tara frantically chanting, and then something fell on top of him.

"Oof," he said, blinking open his eyes. He was covered in Care Bears. It wasn't a bad place to be, but his jaw really...really hurt. He gently rolled Buffy off and laid her on her back. "What did you do?" he asked.

"Just a little sleeping spell," said Willow, kneeling next to them and sounding far more composed than Xander felt. "She'll have a nice nap now."

"And when she wakes up she'll be less cranky?" he asked darkly, but with hope.

"I don't know. It depends on whether whatever's affecting her has worn off."

"Am I the only one here who's thinking heavy restraints--and please tell me you know I don't mean that in the bad way," he added, looking around at the women's faces.

"Do we have anything here that would hold her?" asked Tara dubiously, frowning down at them and then glancing around the shop as if something might spring to mind among the books and herbs and statuary.

"Here," said Spike's anxious voice from somewhere over Xander's shoulder, "What--what's wrong with her?" And Xander was shoved away with a strength that sent him skidding back on his ass a few feet to land against the counter, which his head smacked. Not in a soft way.

"Ow," he said, closing his eyes. "Part two." Anya knelt next to him and handled him soothingly.

"She's okay," he heard Willow say with impatient reassurance. "She's just resting."
"Resting?" Spike laughed in suspicious disbelief. "On the floor?" Xander opened his eyes to see the vampire staring fixedly down at Buffy and touching her face. Even in the painful Buffycentric moment, Xander had an instant to frown at the sight of Spike's own face, which sported a wide bruise around one eye and cheekbone, and a gash running from the corner of his lips.

"Wake up, pet," Spike said.

"It's a spell," said Tara. "We had to...she was violent."

"Yeah, well," said Spike, with a short, angry sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "You know, that's probably why they call them slayers and not slightly-pouty-brooders." But his temper seemed to be easing as he took in the situation; he hadn't drawn his gaze from Buffy's face yet, but now he looked up at Willow. "What'd she do?"

"She punched Xander," said Anya, his honey sounding severely pissed on his behalf, which if the small gods were kind meant that a night of glorious comfort sex lay ahead for him.

"So you thought you'd put a spell on her?" Spike stared at Willow across Buffy's unmoving body. "Hold up, here's a thought: next time she gets a hangnail, cut off her finger. That'll fix it."

Xander could see Willow's defenses springing up, along with the first tiny crack of doubt in her assurance. "We didn't have a choice. She could have killed Xander without even trying."

Thanks, Will.

"Well you can unspell her now," Spike said flatly. "I'm here."

Willow hesitated, looking up at Tara, whose face mirrored that hesitancy then twitched into a realistic expression. "We do still have to find out what happened," Tara said.

Xander drew himself to his feet, with Anya brushing imaginary dust off his shirt in a meticulous diversion of nervous energy and concern. "He's right," he said calmly. "Let's wake her up, so we find out why she's playing La Femme Badass all of a sudden, and make it stop."

"Dormio reversus," said Willow.

Buffy opened her eyes and took them all in, including Spike kneeling at attention. "How you feelin', Slayer?" he asked gently.

At his words she sprang up. Willow tumbled back and then got to her feet with care, while the rest of them tensed. Spike rose more casually, as if he weren't in range of a ticking time bomb. "Touch antsy today, are we?"

Buffy stared coldly at Willow. "Using your magics on me now, Will? Guess I shouldn't have expected any less. We all know how you get." Willow's facade of self-possession broke; her lips parted and trembled, and her hand rose to cover them. "You ever thought of trying to fight honestly?" Buffy asked. "How's about I get you started." And she swept back her hand so fast the punch was already flying as Xander began processing its motion, and it would have landed like a brick through a Willow window if not caught in the grip of Spike's hand.

"Not such a good idea," he said in a hard voice, looking far more surprised and disturbed now that the seriousness of her lunacy had been demonstrated.

She shook her hand free and glared at him. "You can back me up, Spike, or you can go down."
Xander could see Spike considering that for a moment far too seriously, like the crazy thing he was. The vampire took a deep unbreath, exhaled with a resigned look, and said, "You know I'll always back you up, love." He looked down at her, a flicker of lashes that hid his eyes and yet suggested tenderness, then gave her a hard flat shove to the chest. Buffy staggered, knocked out of proximity to Willow, and Spike stepped between them as an immovable object. "And that's me backing you up now," he added softly, starring her down. Xander had never thought he'd willingly watch Spike fight Buffy and not want to help her. He still didn't feel willing.

"Buffy," he said, "Come on. You don't want to do this. Tell us what happened last night that's got you so...so this." He made a gesture at her. "Something had to have happened."

"Last night," said Spike in an odd voice, face flinching open and then shuttering again. "Oh, bloody--"

"What? What of the blood?" said Xander sharply, gladly finding a deserving target for his rage. "Did you do this to her? I swear to god, Spike, if you messed her up--"

"Didn't do anythin' to her, you silly git." Spike's gaze sharpened irritably on him, and Xander reassessed his bruised face and busted lip. "Just realized she must've already been all worked up like this. Didn't realize it at the time or I would've--" He paused, eyelids lowering on a gleam as he looked Buffy's way, before he came back from his thought. "Er, done something proper about it," he finished, collecting himself and clearing his throat.

"Didn't realize it?" murmured Anya.

Buffy, arms crossed, stared at them all in disgust. "You all through?" she broke in. "Because I have something to say."

"Dude, we can't just walk in there," said Egon, blinking at the door of the magic shop. "There are, like, humans inside." Then, oblivious to the startled businesswoman walking past, he lit up his pipe and squinted around at the sunny street in a meditative way. "Y'know, it's real pretty for a Hellmouth."

"Sunny Cal, man," said Roph approvingly, scratching his oozing head. "Sunny Cal."

"Maybe we should come back when it's dark." Egon passed the pipe to Roph, who took a hit with several tiny snorts that gave an impression of deep distress, or perhaps asphyxiation.

"Can't take much more of this," said Roph. "Itchin' is gettin' worse."

Egon squinted at the mass of slime that slid like lava from the top of the demon's now obviously open skull. "Man, if that thing hatches, I do not want to know you, bud."

"That guy, he said they don't hatch for years."

"Who?"

"That guy at the bar, at that place where we stopped, that one night. The guy with the hat."
"Oh, yeah," said Egon very slowly as memory or the figment of it stirred. "Yeah, right."

"They gotta have some ointment," said Roph. "Magical shop and all." He drew his hand down to stare myopically at a sticky egg. "Aw, man," he groaned. "Come on."

The bells on the door jingled.

"--jam them up good and deep for all I care, and I won't say a word. But when I want to have some fun, oh no. No, why should I expect any of you to understand," Buffy went on, pacing, "because hey, you're all perfectly normal, right, with your school and your jobs, never mind that you're shagging demons and werewolves and witches galore and fighting with each other behind my back; never mind the scary visuals I get whenever Anya says 'kielbasa' as if we don't all know what that code word means, oh no, these are all my issues--"

The bells on the door jingled, and Spike shook himself out of his stupefaction and glanced over to where a Majlar demon and a Gnoslac stood blinking and smoking and scratching themselves. They looked around the shop in toasted obliviousness to the scene taking place. He felt blessed, almost awed, by this evidence that the Hellmouth had opened its maw and answered his prayers for a distraction. Everyone else unfroze from their open-mouthed dazes at about the same time, and swung their gawks toward the door, trying to assimilate this new arrival of customers.

"Can I help you?" said Anya with desperate cheer, stepping toward the demons. "We're having a, a sale today, a big sale, ten percent anything in the shop if you buy. Buy now. Please."

"Dude," said the Gnoslac, nudging his companion. "It's that bitty girl."

The Majlar peered across the shop through enslimed eyeglasses. "It's the slayer," he said. "Hey, Slayer." He raised one hand in a peaceable greeting. "This your shop?" Buffy didn't even notice his presence, and the demon looked around at the nearby shelves, picked up a bronze fairy and stared deeply into its face, as if its insipid craftsmanship illuminated the mysteries of the universe. "Right on," he murmured.

Spike raised his voice to speak over the unending rant of Buffy that was still taking place. "Yeah, can we help you, mates?"

The Gnoslac shuffled nearer, stumbled over nothing and apologized to it. "Dude's got a nest," he said vaguely to Anya and Spike, gesturing back to his friend with a smoking pipe that issued the fragrance of burning rubber and raspberries. "Smicka."

"Smicka?" said Anya. "Oh, that's not good." But she sounded very cheerful. "I have an ointment for that. I'll be right back." And off she went, trippingly.

"Fan-tas-tic," drawled the Majlar in a tone of sincere gratitude. As the demon neared, Spike had a better view of his scalp, from which small eggs were starting to slip loose on ribbons of slime. Spike grimaced but couldn't quite tear his gaze away. Horribly compelling. Plus the longer he looked at the mess of suppurating caviar on yon bugger, the longer he could avoid looking at anyone else.
"You two," said Buffy, breaking off her torrent of oversharing as she caught sight of the demons. She put her hands on her hips. "What the hell do you want?"

"Hey, girl," said the Gnoslac mellowly, holding up a hand. "Easy now."

Spike sniffed at the pungent smoke wafting out of the demon's pipe and eyed it with a frown. It seemed very familiar, repulsively so, and...yeah, hold up, he knew that smell. "Here," he barked with alarm, grabbing the pipe away and mashing it to splinters under his boot.

"Hey, sorry, man," said the demon, blinking but unperturbed. "Didn't see a sign."

Spike realized he'd attracted everyone's eyes. "Jackweed," he informed them matter-of-factly. "Mood amplifier." He gave a mild sniff, admitted, "Always been allergic to the stuff. Second-hand smoke gives me a headache somethin' terrible." He gestured at his head with a loose fan of fingers. "Bit too rich for..." He paused, gaze slewing to Buffy as it dawned. "...humans, too."

Everyone else turned to look at Buffy.

"What the hell are you all looking at?" she asked irritably.

Outside the Summers house, the darkness of late evening had fallen. Inside, a lamp snapped on with offensive brightness.

"Oh, god," Buffy groaned, burying her face under her pillow. "No. Asleep. Come back next year."

"You have to eat something." Willow sat on the bed next to her and stroked her jammied shoulder.

"Soup here," said Dawn cheerfully.

Buffy sat up, unable to look at Willow. She let Dawn set the tray down over her blanketed legs, and reluctantly appreciated the alphabet soup and grilled cheese sandwich, each half speared with a frilled toothpick and an olive, the traditional Summers arrangement. "Thanks, Dawn." She smiled up at her sister, then made herself meet Willow's eyes. "Will," she began, but whatever was supposed to come after that didn't make it out.

"'S'okay, Buffy." Willow took her hand and squeezed it. "Apology anticipated and bud nipped. We all know you didn't mean those things you said."

"Those things we're never ever, ever going to speak of again?" said Buffy, conscious of her little pitcher with the big ears.

"Exactly," said Willow with a wry, reassuring smile.

Buffy hesitated, then squeezed Willow's hand back. "Dawn, could you let us talk?" she asked. "Alone?" She made the request as gentle as she could, but Dawn's face fell, then hardened over to an opaque smoothness.

"Sure," said her sister, and turned on her heel. The door closed behind her too quietly.
One battle at a time, thought Buffy. "Will, really. I'm so sorry." She thought she could see a renewal of wary coolness in Willow's face now that Dawn was out of the room, and she swallowed down a touch of panic. "I can't even believe I--well, uh, that I said that thing about witches and candlesticks, for one thing, and do I, do I still have any foot left in here?" She opened her mouth and pointed inward, hoping Willow would take pity on her and find this funny.

Willow pretended to peer inside. "Just a little toe, maybe." She smiled again, faintly. "You--you, uh, stoppered all kinds of stuff up, Buffy, and it gushed out all messy and broken, kinda like a big ol' Smicka hatch. And, you know, I'm not sure I'd win a lot of brownie points with you guys if I shared the thoughts I have sometimes."

Buffy ducked her head, shame dragging aside her brave front. "Well, if you wanted to let rip, I'd certainly be deserving of the full Smicka." She looked back up abruptly. "And you're being way too forgiving, so I think you should. Let it rip, I mean."

"Oh, uh. Hmm." Willow hesitated and then fell silent, eyes downcast as if she were harboring guilty thoughts.

"Willow." Buffy moved the tray aside, and pulled her legs up, crossed; Willow obligingly copied her pose, and it was almost enough to carry Buffy back in time to high school, when they'd been sleepover buddies and complete confidantes. "Look at me." She took both Willow's hands in her own, hoping she wasn't going too far out on a limb. "You know, don't you, you know I trust you?"

Willow looked at her as if wanting to believe, as if waiting to see what else she'd say. Buffy forged on. "I trust you with my life, Will. I rely on you like no one else. No one."

"But you think they're dishonest," said Willow quietly, in confusion. And it was coming out now, that rawness of hurt.

"No," said Buffy firmly. "No. That was crazy talk. I respect your craft. God, I do. You have powers I could never tap. All of you. Anya and money, keeping me from being some street Buffy, kicking around in gutters. You and Tara with spells, Xander..." She paused to duck her head in a laugh. "He keeps the earth solid when I'm at risk of flying off." She looked up again, chest aching as if her heart expanded with need. "We make each other stronger, better. We've learned that lesson before the hard way--I don't want to see us pushed to the edge again." She swallowed. "But it's that wanting that's the problem. I know this is my fault, this not talking and then talking way too much. I shut myself down. Again. I shut us all down."

"What do you mean?" Willow asked, but Buffy could tell she knew. Something in the dip of her lashes, the little warble in her voice. This thing between them went way back, maybe too far back to fix entirely; it was like a quilt with a hundred tiny rips in it, each one carefully mended, but coming undone again as the threads aged. Buffy wasn't going to give in, though. Of them all, Willow was her security blanket, no matter how things changed; even now that she didn't look to Buffy with the same easy admiration in her eyes as when they were younger. Things had never been as simple as they'd seemed then, anyway. Willow, Buffy thought. Willow had never been so simple.

"Just," Buffy said. "Just that I wanted us all to get along like one big happy family, and for you not to do any damage to Spike...any serious damage. And you guys have tried so hard, really hard, and I can't even tell you how much I appreciate it." Buffy held Willow's eyes. "But none of it matters if we're not friends, if we can't talk to each other."

There was a pause, as Willow obviously hesitated. "Do you really want your mom's bedroom?" she
asked finally, betraying a touch of anxiety. "Because, Buffy, you know it's yours. I just didn't know that it was a big deal, I swear."

"God, no!" Buffy's grip tightened on her friend's warm fingers.

"And if you want me to move out," Willow stumbled on, tears brimming along her eyes, "I'll go, 'cause I don't want to be housemates if it means we can't be friends."

"No, no, oh god," said Buffy, and fell forward in a hug that Willow answered clutchily. They both sniffled and huddled.

After a while, they gathered themselves again and talked some more, and Buffy felt almost as if she were visiting a friend she hadn't seen in years. As they were each absently tearing apart a cheese sandwich half and putting bites in their mouths, Willow said, chewing a bit chipmunkily, "So, was it really what it looked like?"

"What?"

Willow smiled in a curious, knowing way. "Did you really beat up Spike and have your way with him?"

Buffy's cheeks heated. "I was...really out of it last night."

"It must be nice," Willow hesitated, looking down and unfocusedly off to one side, "to be able to let it all out like that, and not have to worry about hurting. To let loose."

And Buffy thought she should deny it, but they were talking and she wanted to tell the truth to her best friend. "It's...yeah. It is, kind of. I know it shouldn't be," she added quickly. "I know it's way wrong."

Willow studied her, chewing. "He's not as bad for you as I thought he was, for all that he's hangin' around like a big ol' piece of meat that's turned," she admitted in a dry, quiet voice. "I mean, definitely still grossed out here, and...um, sorry." Willow seemed to catch herself. "That was ooshie honesty," she said apologetically.

"No, it's all right." Buffy gave close consideration to her cheese sandwich. "I know it's...it's not the best choice I've made."

"Sex is a funny thing," said Willow. "If you'd told me when I was, like, crushgirl on Xander Harris that I'd someday be all over a girl with dimples and a soft little nose and a sweet mole on her tushy, I'd, uh--" She caught Buffy's grin and blushed. "Say, what's in this cheese?" Willow asked with mock alarm and suspicion. A moment of affection lingered, and then Willow's tone dipped, more serious. "I worry about you, though, Buffy. If I thought that it was anything more than raw, crazy nookie with a dead guy who admittedly has muscles on his muscles--" She broke off, looking at Buffy's face with slightly wider eyes. "Buffy, is it--are you--"

"God, no," said Buffy at once. "You so know there's a no, right?" She maintained a steady gaze under Willow's worried one.

"Right," said Willow, as if assuring herself. "'Cause hey, no soul there. Just demon." But she sounded unconvincing, and Buffy wasn't entirely sure of what.

"You know what he is to me, Will," said Buffy, her words cool and composed. "He's the thing in my life I don't have to worry about hurting. I can use him, and walk away. He's what every slayer needs; a willing slave on a short leash who sets an example to every other vamp out there. Lets
them know just who's the boss of them."


"Someday, I'll meet someone," said Buffy, plucking and smoothing her coverlet, talking half to herself. "Someone I'll love, who'll love me. And I'll know when it's right. But I can't be the girl who keeps chasing the dream all around town. I don't have a lot of room for normal in my life." She glanced out the window restlessly. "What am I gonna do, meet some nice doctor and have to explain to him why my bruises heal so fast, why I have to go out every night and come back with grave-dirt on my shoes?"

Willow touched her leg, rubbed it. "You're the Slayer," she acknowledged, and when Buffy looked over and caught her eye she could see it was if Willow were finally realizing something that she hadn't before, pulling out of those old words some new truth, difficult and sad. Something not of high school or college, but of an adulthood that extended beyond them.

"I'm the Slayer," said Buffy quietly.

"Slayer," he said, surveying her from across the cave. Dozens of candles flickered among the greenery, as if he'd been expecting her unplanned visit in the small hours. She wandered closer, letting her gaze drift down over him slowly, and he stood motionless, head cocked, and silently submitted.

She liked to look at him. No big wrong in that, was there. Smooth pale hair curving along the shape of his skull. Fine eyebrows, the left nicked in some hundred year old fight whose details he kept vague. Eyes, slitted and dark and full of that eternal hunger which was so wrong it had to earn death; eyes watching her now steadily. Faint, faded bruise on his cheek. Face and neck a map of saltless arcs and hollows she'd tongued until familiar, leading down his body. Chest bare, loose shirt open. Hips in dark jeans, weirdly bare feet, because you'd think he lived in his boots. This was hers. She could anything with him that she wanted, no matter how brutal, and he'd let her.

"Hey," she said.

Spike cleared his throat, looking off-balanced, even slightly vulnerable. She could never tell how much of that was an act, the camouflage of a predator. His expression was becoming guarded in defense against hers, his gaze detaching as if hers discomfited him, as if he needed to look right now at his walls and bed and plants.

"Lo," he said brusquely. "Feelin' better, I take it."

"All better," she said.

He nodded, cast his gaze around again, anywhere but her. "I was just cleanin' up the place a bit. Gets a right mess. Don't know how." He laughed uncomfortably then noticed a pile of tattered paperbacks on the table; he grabbed them all and tossed them into a crate that sat far back in the
shadows.

She took off her outer shirt while his back was turned, stretched her arms above her head and flexed her muscles, warming them up. He turned back, saw her bared skin. "Dossin’ here tonight?" he asked casually, then gestured upstairs with his long, careless fingers. "I can sleep in the crypt if you want a place to be alone, get some rest. Know it's been--"

"Shut up," she said.

He raised one brow, shut up completely. She went to him, ran a hand across his chest, heard his intake of breathlessness. She moved behind him and drew off his shirt; it slid off fluttering like a dark bird as she kissed between his shoulder blades. He stiffened, saying nothing, fists clenching as her lips traced the places on the human back, his inhuman back, where wings might seem to have once grown before being ripped off. When she licked his spine he said her name and tried to turn, but she held him still by both arms.

"I'm angry at you," she said. His head moved as he listened.

"That right?" he asked, in a low voice that barely left his throat.

She let go of him then, let him turn around. He studied her warily as if mastering confusion, as if trying to be tough. "What'd I do this time, then--come between you and a good tussle? Shoulda let you whale on the little witch, that it?"

"No. That was the right thing to do," she assured him. "But I'm still angry at you. I'm always angry at you."

A flash of hurt struck across his face, then was absorbed into its white marble. "That so. Didn't know that. Must've--"

"You're a vampire," Buffy said. "And I'm a slayer." She stepped back, holding him compelled with her eyes, willing herself to be hard for him. "And we're behind in our work-outs." And then she struck him across one fine cheek, making his head snap to the side. The other night her blows had been wild, casual. She'd known he wanted far more but she'd been too caught up in herself to give him what he'd wordlessly craved. But she was in control now. Too much of it. Now she wanted what he wanted. To rip free.

"Fight me," she said, inviting his strength.

He slowly turned his head back to her in that way he had of moving, head lowered, gaze sliding up from under dark brows, as if he were leashing himself in or preparing to strike; that way he had of moving which made a knot pull painfully tight between her legs, drawing together in slick focus everything in her that was hot and needy and wrong. Buffy struck him again harder, making his lips part. His eyelids were growing heavy, he was breathing, not breathing, loosening before her very eyes even as his muscles tightened.

"Punish me," he whispered savagely, as if begging for love.

She lashed out, and he let the blows fall, holding himself unnaturally steady as she punched his chest and ribs and face, hard enough to bruise, hard enough to draw blood from his mouth and nose. She was sweating in just minutes, her face flushed. Each punch made her knuckles ache and that ache echo in the core of her, and she could tell what it was doing to him, the hardness visible between his legs even though she didn't look down, the small sounds escaping him as if he throbbed with each blow. When she landed one in the middle of his throat, he shuddered and
choked back a groan of pleasure, and she knew he was close, riding the edge. The scent of his own blood had to be sharpening the knife of his hunger. It was sharpening hers.

She stopped, trembling. Spike opened his eyes and drank her in deeply. He licked blood off his lips with a moment's care, eyes glittering furiously, and then his face disappeared half behind his demon. Buffy shuddered as something inside her, no different, sprang free.

He leaped on her, knocked her to the floor and kissed her, tongue a ruthless lash inside her mouth, hands strong enough to rip her apart dragging desperately at her hair, her skin. She kissed him back with that wild deep hunger that brought her here, making sounds she hoped her friends would never know she had in her, crying out his name, body arching under his, and then, oh god, she felt him rub the ridges of his face over her neck, down her chest. It was too much, too much. She grabbed his hair, clawed it stiffly, scissored her legs around him, digging her feet into the back of his calves. He shoved up her tee and bra and she lifted them further to shuck them off. She couldn't look down but she could feel him taking her breasts in his mouth one at a time so gently she wanted to hit him again, and his mouth was soft but the sculpted mask he wore was not. He stroked its edges roughly and deliberately across her tight nipples. Heat poured across her face and her stunned body slowed. She arched up under him without words. She had no words.

Gasping, she opened like a flower when he twisted his fingers inside her. He lay close, face looming above hers. "Look at me," he said, working his hand down there ruthlessly, and she did look until her vision went grey and her lips fell apart in moans and her body seized him. And then she was blind, hands trying to find purchase on the stone surface of the floor. It wasn't enough, though, wasn't. He pulled her skirt off and lifted her nakedness as if she weighed no more than a feather, carried her wrapped around him to the bed and dumped her across it.

She lay back with eyes closed as his hands moved across her, hard and smooth; every place he touched left scorched. His fingers slid between her legs again, stroked her slippery folds, drew out.

"You're bleeding," she heard him say in quiet wonder.

"Oh god," she gasped, twisting her face to one side as he lowered himself, his head slipping down unseen to mouth her breasts, her belly, moving slowly as if waiting for refusal, and then closing on the heat between her legs in a soft wide kiss. He lapped her, forcing her open, head brushing the tremble of her inner thighs. He drank and sucked her, first in silence then sobbing against her with a degree of wild urgency she'd never heard in him before, until the chafing fury building inside her became too much and blossomed. She cried out and he tore his mouth away, snarling. He rose and seized her hips and pushed into her with one motion, thickness and a swell of fullness at the deepest part of her; and cold, and not cold at all, he drove inside her and took what he needed.

Buffy opened her eyes just as he closed his, and watched him find his release, the demon sliding away as he did.

After a minute, he descended across her gently in a bridge of flesh and bone. More minutes passed as he recovered. One palm stroked against her hair. The echoes of him pulsed inside her, a contraction around an ache of emptiness where he no longer was.

"Better now?" he asked finally, raising his head to look at her. His eyes were lit with a soft, unholy happiness and a hard, holy unhappiness that she could see all twisted up together, his face damaged and understanding; and she realized she wore a tiny smile that mirrored his own. She wanted him again, so badly it hurt, so badly it had to hurt him. Her entire body was a secret she could only tell here, where there was nothing close to normal. No need for kind words, no need to pull punches. It wasn't at all easy to be with him. He honed her edge and she bled against his. But not to death. She was learning how not to bleed to death.
"I'm good," she said, not having to think about it.

He kissed her and she let him, her eyes closing, the world fading into darkness.

The End

Chapter End Notes

This is not beta-read; Feel free to send feedback, including any stuff that chafes your hide, like mangled Latin, continuity gaffes, blah blah, blah, and excluding rants on how Spike/Buffy is evil, because I still don't want to hear it.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
It was seven-thirty in the evening and the sky should have been too light for a vampire to be out, but it was cloudy. They walked down Main Street, and she was wearing her eggshell-blue top, vee-necked, with its two ribbons hanging loose, and a long flowered skirt. He was wearing the coat, the jeans, the boots, a black shirt. He looked more corpseslike than usual to her, shadows deepening around his eyes, lips a whiter shade of pale. Maybe he was hungry, or maybe it was just in contrast to the tanned girls passing them on the sidewalk, bumping one another carelessly as they giggled and chatted, wearing shorts and tank tops and looking so young that Buffy felt strangely old.

Their fingers nearly brushed as they walked, hers and his, and she was conscious of it, and self-conscious. He was air temperature; he was like a slight breeze walking alongside her. All around them living people wandered and laughed, window-shopping and pushing strollers. She walked through them with her dead boyfriend. They passed a jewelry store and she paused to look at the display without thinking, and he stopped with her. Mirrors enhanced the jewelry scattered across the velvet and he was not in them.

"You like those?" he asked, eyes on her and not the jewelry, and she could tell he was feeling her out. His voice was wary, interest hidden under a hard shell. He'd given her a necklace once, over a year ago; and, that being then, she'd given it back. That's not what we are, she'd said. We're not dating.

She stared at the earrings. "Too dangly." She turned away, and they walked again.

He was taking her to dinner and a movie, their first date since...ever. It was weird, too weird, and the nearer they strolled to the restaurant the more freaked she became, the slower her steps grew. Surrounded on all sides by normal, she felt sure that everyone who looked at them together knew what Spike was; what she was for being with him. She dawdled and he patiently indulged her; she could feel him doing so, feel him carefully saying nothing. He was all broody silence. The next window she paused at, he lit a cigarette, as if he needed something to do.

"Reservation's for seven forty-five," he said with a facade of indifference, exhaling smoke. He stood with his back to the storefront and eyes on the street, gaze flicking around the crowds, as if expecting attack or wishing he could deliver one.

"Who makes a reservation for seven forty-five?" Buffy asked, just to be rhetorical; to lodge a complaint now in case she wanted to blame him for something later.

"Maitre d'," he said.
"What are you going to have?" She began walking again, and he fell back into step with her. "I mean...to eat."

"Dunno. Haven't seen the menu yet."

She nearly rolled her eyes. "Terse much?"

Spike raised his cigarette to his lips, drew in a heavy drag, said nothing. She glanced over at his profile, and after a few pondering moments he inclined his head her way to gaze back. Smoke trailed from his nostrils. "Suppose so," he said blandly. His face was expressionless, but his cool eyes glinted.

Buffy tried to hide a smile he didn't deserve, then felt it fade into uncertainty. Maybe he wasn't trying to be funny. Maybe he was pissed off. Who could tell, with him. He pitched his cigarette into the street, big litterbug, and then the back of his hand brushed the back of hers as he moved in to let a man pass. A hot ache descended her body in less time than it took to draw a breath, and she let her fingers entwine with his for one moment--their fingers not even curling together, only stroking like dry, hot kindling, knuckles to knuckles--before she pulled her hand away. She awkwardly hugged her own arms in a jitter of nerves, instinctively trying to pass it off as if she were chilled when it nearly eighty degrees.

He of course noticed; how could he not. "Yeah, right," he replied as if she'd said something, as if she'd delivered a reminder. "Gotta be careful. That one," Spike said, pointing at a jogger coming toward them, "she's got her eye on you. Spies all around us." His voice was oddly light, full of bullshit, and he feigned a glance over his shoulder, pretending to be worried: "Can't always see 'em. Got to be mindful. No way of tellin' when one of them's gonna file a report, get the word in to Red."

He made her so easily angry, and embarrassed. "You know the rules," Buffy said in a low, tight voice.

"Well, now you mention. Might 'ave misplaced that memo."

Buffy ground to a halt, forcing him to stop. Nearby, the Espresso Pump spilled light out onto the sidewalk, and kids socialized around the open-air tables. He turned and stood with a slight twist of hips, but met her eyes directly, a shadow of anger clearly visible in his own.

"Here's your memo." She kept her arms tightly by her sides to avoid crossing them again. "You wanted me to admit that I care. Fine, I care. Why, I have no idea, because you're annoying and homicidal and dead and I, very clearly, am one sick little biscuit. But letting that go...my friends can't know that and you know why. And I can't--" Her tongue tripped as Spike closed on her, the few paces between them swallowed by his presence. "--I can't walk down the street holding hands and I can't play footsie with you, or wear your ring. And, god, I don't even want that."

Spike rested one hand on the wall next to her head and leaned in, and Buffy's heart beat faster against her will. "Not like they don't already know, love."

Buffy's heart skipped now. "What? When? What did you tell them?" She could hear her voice rising with anxiety and hated it, hated him for making her feel this way.

"Didn't tell them anythin'. But you can be sure they've sussed it out." He stared down into her eyes. "They know and pretend not to, otherwise they'd have to do something about it. Besides." He lifted his brows, gaze widening a fraction to capture hers even more strongly. "They enjoy reminding me I'm just your sodding Spike-bot." She flinched at the deliberateness with which he articulated the
"That is so unfair," Buffy began in a whisper, voice shaking as it rose with her anger, "Don't pretend you didn't get off on...on what we did." She clung to the tail of his remarks, unable to think about the implications of what he'd said first.

"Wouldn't dream of it." Spike's mouth moved--lips and tongue--as if he were remembering the sensual ache of a punch; his hard gaze didn't dip. "Not so fun is being told to bugger off till I've healed, savin' your face by hidin' mine. Watchin' you go all broody like you're bad and wrong and broken. 'Cause you got off on it."

"Better than all function," he said, and he smiled, not with his lips, merely with a twitch of cheeks, the lines around his eyes. Removing his hand from the wall, he straightened but stood close, looming and looking down at her under hooded lids, and Buffy was conscious of herself again, her hair, clothes, body. Of him. The surface of her tingled above a familiar undertow. I should have worn the other shirt, she thought, and looked up at her lover, a walking nightmare who'd killed a girl less than a year ago and drunk his dinner from her neck. Redeemable? No. So she controlled him instead, punished him. And she couldn't tell him why it really unnerved her, what she'd done, that it was not because she feared her own darkness, but because afterwards she felt as though she'd beaten a dumb animal and made love to the man trapped inside.

She thought he might touch her, her shoulder or her hair.

But he didn't touch her. He backed up a respectful step, relinquishing her space, coat swinging around his calves, and discomfited she walked alongside him again. He took the outside of the sidewalk; at some point, she couldn't remember when, he'd started doing that more often, and eventually she'd noticed. It was the kind of small chivalry her mother used to tell her to look for in a boyfriend.

Hello and welcome to my terribly strange and so-called life, Buffy thought, as old bewilderment embraced her. God, I swear if I didn't know better, I'd think I was--

"Buffy!"

Startled, Buffy looked around and saw a dark-haired girl, all bangled and sparkle-shirty and insanely caffeinated, waving at her from a table in the Espresso Pump, surrounded by friends whose scrubbed faces and coordinated colors carried the authoritative stamp of sorority chic, even if you overlooked their Greeked tees.

"Buffy! Hi! Hey!" The well-manicured hand attached to the perky body didn't stop waving.

Alarmed, Buffy lifted one hand in weak salutation, then murmured to Spike as they approached: "High school, college, classes with Willow." She broke off as they reached the table. "Hey, Naomi." A polite smile.

"Buffy, wow. It's so good to see you." Naomi beamed. She had a lot of teeth, very white and even, and prominent gums, very pink and shiny, the overall effect of which was like something you might find on a dentist's display counter.
I will not flee, thought Buffy, briefly wide-eyed and rabbit-stunned by the teeth being bared at her. She forced her gaze up three inches. 'Good to see you too.' That had almost sounded sincere.

"How are you? It's been forever. What are you doing these days? Willow said you're not in school, that you're working? I heard about your mom when it happened. I'm so sorry. I think it's so amazing that you're taking care of your sister and everything. So where are you working? I heard it was like some shop downtown where Willow goes? Hi, how are you?" The last part of this volley was directed cheerily at Spike, who'd just lit a cigarette. He froze and glanced up, cigarette jutting from his mouth and smoking, lighter still cupped to his face for a moment before he lowered it. He tucked his lighter away, removed his cigarette, and exhaled on a grunt. Punk, cool.

"Do you mind?" said one of the other girls. "This is No Smoking." She pointed to a sign.

Spike considered the nearest support pillar, then looked down and traced the conceptual line across the pavement between outside and in, sidewalk and cafe, and where his boots stood in relation to it. He looked back up, expressionless but satisfied. 'Not inside, am I.' He lifted the cigarette back to his mouth deliberately.

There fell a brand of silence unique to miffed sorority girls. Buffy cleared her throat, and Spike drifted off, not entirely removing himself from orbit of their table. Smoke lazily rolled over and Buffy apologized with her eyes to Naomi’s friends, managed a wry expression of what-can-you-do?

"So, Buffy--"

Natter, natter, the bint said, but Spike tuned her out. Late for dinner meant late for the movie, and sod it. He'd gladly take a pass on overcooked steak and some arty flick about missionaries, except he was doing this for Buffy, what he thought she'd like. She'd been tight-lipped in every sense of the word since their last night together, as if a round of Punch-me-Judy was something new under the moon, so to speak. As if they hadn't met in a mad tear of violence, and fallen for each other in chaos and crashing timber. After too many long silences, he'd been fed up. She wanted normal, he'd give her it. He could play at normal passably well; he cleaned up nice.

Spike took a deeper drag of his cigarette, feeling a nostalgic stir of memory. Top hat and tails, sweeping through the glittering capitals of Europe like a plague, with his mad bride draped in fur and pearls taken from a dead woman's neck; her gloved hand on his arm as he led her from one opera house to the next, to balls and theatre premiers, and wicked salons where they were often admired, and if enough so, even graciously inclined to spare the hostess.

Now here he stood, loitering outside a coffee shop filled with yammering kiddies, in California, US of A, the far blighted shore of a blighted continent filled sea to sodding sea with strip malls and cornfields.

A strange and terrible thing is my existence, Spike thought darkly. Then wished for a scrap of paper to jot the line down. Nothing in his pockets, of course. A rhyme for existence. His gaze wandered half-sightedly across the sprawl of bright, shiny faces in the cafe, all garish color and giggles and steam.

Pestilence.

"Hey, goth is over, man." A hoot of laughter supported this, followed by a whistle. "Here, pretty boy. Thee anything you like, thweetheart?" A babble of voices overlapping, stifled laughter: "Cut it out, guy, come on," said half in embarrassment, half encouragement. "Yo, where's Morticia--"

Snorts of laughter. "--gun in that coat, mow us all down--" Rattling of cups on table, pounding.
"Ooh, Gothboy, here Gothboy, here boy--" Sharp whistles. "Cliff, come on, watch out, he may come over and thpit on you."

Frowning, Spike slowly brought his distracted focus to bear on a quintet of great oafs who'd somehow managed to cram their fat-blooded bodies around a tiny table in sporty, homoerotic proximity. He raised his brows and considered them while smoking down the last of his fag. He had somehow earned their attention. Once, they would have regretted attracting his. At his look they all averted their eyes, but continued to snigger and mutter rude things to each other in low voices that he could hear far better than they knew.

He flicked his cigarette in their direction, landing it dead center on the table amidst the paper cups of bland, Americanized coffee. They looked up as one astonished lump of great dimness, and Spike raised his brows innocently. "Sorry, mates. Didn't see you there."

One huge slope-crowned wanker slid off his chair and stood flexing beefy muscles. "You think that's funny?"

"Oh, heavens no," Spike said, dropping his own accent and cadging from Giles a lofty, fruity tone guaranteed to tick off a certain stripe of 'Merican bourgeoisie. He sauntered closer, felt their unease manifest as he stepped smiling into the light. "Pardon, so sorry. Do allow me to tidy that up for you fellows." He reached in for his cigarette, carelessly letting his arm meander and his coat sleeve knock two coffees crotchward. "Good Lord, how clumsy of me!" he apologized, barking a mild, Gilesish laugh of astonishment. Oafs were leaping out of their chairs to avoid the coffee as he stretched his fingers for his fag and sent it skittering lapward, knocking another cup over in a failed fumble to recover it. And now the lot of them were standing, gathering force like a storm.

"You are so dead, punk," said the lead wanker.

Spike tipped his head slightly to one side and allowed a smile to ease into his lips. "Dear me," he said, dropping his voice to its oldest, softest charm, "how funny you should--"

"There you are, honey," said Buffy, grabbing his arm in a meaningful, viselike grip. "Sorry I got caught up chatting," and she was speaking more to the humans than to him, beaming a tight smile all around the table, "You know how it is. Girl talk."

"Hey, miss," said Big Wank, chest puffing out with earnest rudeness as he eyed her. "This your boyfriend? 'Cause you could do a lot better."

"Thanks for the advice," said Buffy dismissively, beginning to tug Spike away.

"No, seriously." And he stepped in their path, persistent as a sidewalk evangelist. Inside, Spike felt everything he was leap to shake its cage, a silent roar trapped behind glass that couldn't give. His body tensed with strain. "I've seen you around," Wank said. "You're all right. I've got a girlfriend, but I could introduce you to plenty of okay guys. We're having a party out at the house tonight. Pi Kappa Alpha. You should come by."

"I make a point of avoiding the whole beer-and-demons frat scene."

"You're a sassy one. S'okay. It's cute."

Spike was trying to disengage himself from Buffy but she wouldn't let go, and struggling with a wisp of girl no one knew as slayer would make him look a prize git, which she was bloody well counting on. He seethed and leaned forward as far as her clinging grip allowed. "Sod off, mate."

"What is that, pansy code?" asked the oaf. "You want to soh-doh-me?" Over near the table, his
"Look, you really need to walk away," Buffy said sharply, and Spike could feel her readying for a fight. Her wind-up-doll pique failed to impress those ignorant of slayer strength, though.

"Come on, don't be like that--"

Buffy tried to veer around him, forcing Spike along with her, but the oaf stepped to one side, blocking them again. Exasperated, Spike jabbed ribward hard enough to surprise her, yanked his arm free, and moved chest to chest with his adversary. "Lady isn't interested," he said, the demon kicking at the inside of his skull as pain began to radiate like hairline fractures. He smiled, rolling his cheeks around the sweet taste of rage. "But you have me right pegged. A big, juicy fellow like yourself--real tasty treat to someone like me." He stared into the human's dense eyes and tipped his head, his smile thinning. "What say you give us a kiss?" He vamped and bared his fangs, and the oaf fell back in horror and then ran. Uttering a growl, Spike turned his face to the others, who promptly followed. By the time he'd turned back to Buffy, he'd slipped the mask off and was smiling again, amusement and fury mingling inside him like wine with blood.

She was standing with arms folded. She'd locked out all expression from her face, but he could hear her heart, like a door slammed over and over. If she'd had a demon, she'd've been wearing it now, she was that pissed. Spike thought she'd tear him a new one on the spot, but she turned and walked away, across the street. He followed, dogging her heels and her hunched shoulders until she abruptly whirled.

"Go," she said. As if he were in fact a dog. "Just go. Don't follow me. I don't want to see you right now. In fact, I really don't want to see you any time soon."

Spike's face tightened, and he braced himself with residual anger as fear ripped at him. He was on the verge of saying fine then, giving her the manly tch of dismissal, walking away with his cool intact.

He was on the verge of falling to his knees in a public street.

"When, then," he asked quietly, and he put every art he had into presenting honest humility; and such a virtuoso was he at his own masquerade that he didn't even know where art left off and truth began.

Buffy, silent, teetered between icy winter and the first spring thaw--no more than the hint of it, one peeping leaf on a tree--but he could see it trembling there for him. "I'll let you know," she said at last. And turning, she walked on, his hard-hearted girl in her flowered skirt, and with only that thin line of hope to cling to Spike watched her go, until he was a vampire left standing alone in the middle of the street as a lady with a pram trundled by, smiling down at her child.

"...and he was all 'Ahh, ahh, my sneaker's on fire!' and Ed was like, 'Throw it in the lake, man, just toss that duck on the water.'"

Dawn giggled at Kerry's story, while Kerry rambled on between sophisticated drags of her cigarette, blue-tipped fingers curled tightly to her palm. Kerry was always a bit tense. It wasn't
entirely clear why, but it probably had something to do with the 'rents. These things always did.
Other people's families fascinated Dawn, and she spent a lot of time trying to puzzle them out.
Kerry's parents traveled a lot, often leaving their daughter alone. *I rule this roost*, Kerry liked to
say. She drank and smoked and screwed around, and somehow you knew that about her before you
even met her, what with the piercings and tufty hair and how she always looked ready to shuck
loose of her clothes. She called herself an anarchist. Dawn admired her deeply for having a political
vision, and sometimes for the rest. Just for being different, even if some of the difference was
kinda skeezy.

"And most of it ended up in the tree," Kerry went on. "It's still hanging there, but--"

Dawn, grinning, looked briefly away to keep herself on track and saw Buffy down the street, head
ducked, approaching them unawares. "Oh my god," Dawn said, grabbing Kerry's arm. "It's my
sister. Hurry, come on." She pulled Kerry into the mouth of an alley and up against the wall.
"Shhh," she hissed. They stood there silently for several moments, until Buffy passed by. She
didn't notice them lurking, and Dawn had a tiny glimpse of her sister's grim profile and the back of
her head before she disappeared.

"She was supposed to be patro--at the shop," Dawn complained, catching herself mid-gripe and
then poking her head out to make sure the coast was clear. They exited the alley, continuing in the
opposite direction. "That's weird."

"You have no concept of weird, honey." Kerry shook her head.

"Hey, I'm all over weird." Dawn gave her friend a knowing look. "Trust me." She gave a dry little
laugh that she felt sure conveyed experience and cynicism, even if she couldn't share the dirty
details. Which was too bad. Wistfulness tugged at her as she thought of her secrets.

Kerry returned her look, smiling condescendingly but not unaffectionately. "Sibs, your brand of
weird comes in little home-baked squares. Last week, you were all what's-the-wack when she
served spaghetti instead of linguini for dinner."

"I like linguini," said Dawn defensively. "She knows that." A vague sense of urgency rose with her
voice. She had to prove something here. "But that's nothing," she scoffed. "I'm talking about real
weird. Big weird. Stuff you can't even imagine. No one can."

They reached the drugstore and entered as she spoke. Kerry shoved indifferently by a man coming
out, who didn't move aside as expected. They bumped and Kerry kept walking, but Dawn gave him
a quick apologetic glance. He stared at her a moment, eyes expressionless; he was wearing a
trenchcoat belted up tight despite the warm weather, and a hat pulled down low. Frowning, Dawn
followed quickly on Kerry's heels. They cut by silent understanding over to the make-up section to
investigate the goods.

"So, anyway," she said. "All I'm saying is, people in this town have no idea what's really going on.
Everyone walking around out there, they're like sheep."

"Yeah," affirmed Kerry, turning over lipsticks to read their names. "Baa baa, bland sheep." She
didn't sound as if she were really listening to Dawn.

Dawn distractedly ran her fingers across the tester compacts and rubbed make-up absently between
her fingers, frowning. She shot a sidelong glance at Kerry, took a breath. "So, you've been in
Sunnydale a couple years now. Do you...like...ever notice anything strange?"

"In Sunnydale?" Kerry cracked an amused, contemptuous laugh. "This has got to be the most
leave-It-to-Beaver burg I've ever lived in. I can't wait till I graduate. I am gonna be so outta here, girlfriend. Back to San Fran where they know how to party."

Dawn lowered her head, carefully inspecting a bottle of nail polish as next to her Kerry slipped a lipstick in her pocket. "So, didn't you think it was funny--funny strange, not funny ha-ha--that fourteen kids from our class died last year?"

Kerry was now putting on some eyeliner in front of a tiny courtesy mirror. "Small town teen suicides. No big surprise," she muttered. "What else you gonna do here except park and drink and shoot yourself."

"Okay, we're not *that* small a town and you *know* those weren't shootings. Not even suicides," Dawn said impatiently. "Plus, hello, remember that time we saw Cheryl Innes, like, two days after she'd been buried?"

"Sorry, chica. There was too much mall between me and her to tell. But somehow I'm thinkin' Cheryl didn't crawl out of her grave for the Gap's big back-to-school sale." Kerry smiled with satisfaction at her reflection in the mirror, pucker her lips and bat her lashes.

Dawn sighed and moved closer to confide in a low, intense voice: "If I told you something, a really big thing, would you believe me?"

Kerry straightened, met her eye with her own strangely blank but curious gaze. "You a dyke? 'Cause it's okay, Dawn. You don't have to be all freaked with me. I'm not into that scene but I totally respect the girl power."

Rolling her eyes, Dawn said, "No, I'm not gay. And it's bigger than that. It's Twilight Zone big."

Her friend shrugged. "Okay, spill."

Pumped up with her own bursting secrets, Dawn held up her hands to preempt any immediate rebuff of scorn. "So, I know this is going to sound crazy. But--" She paused, suddenly wary, as a thought struck her. "Wait, I'm not going to say 'Hey, there are vampires in Sunnydale' and you be all 'Oh, that'? 'Cause I'm not--"

"Vampires?" Kerry hooted loudly enough to carry across several aisles. "Oh, baby. You are so funny."

Stung, Dawn crossed her arms. But still, this reaction wasn't entirely unexpected. "You think I'm full of it," she said with a cross of dignity and resignation.

"Brimming, even." Kerry slid an arm around her shoulder and they walked from the store.

"It's true," Dawn said, more calmly. "Vampires and demons and werewolves and witches. Real witches. We're living on a Hellmouth and humans are just the Cheez Whiz on its big evil cracker. And," she said with confidence, "I can prove it to you."
computer was overflowing with the damn things. She'd tried to convey the concept of uploading to
him, but e-mail was about as advanced as he'd ever gotten. She was storing her own copies online,
but new ones kept rolling in overnight, every night. The man was scanner happy. The results were
fuzzy at best, and though that was probably not his fault, Willow felt as if she were trying to
decipher meaning from row after row of crushed fleas. It wasn't as if she knew how to read
Naciran. No one did except the watcher who'd first found the scroll, who unfortunately since then
had been discovered painting the walls of his room with his own blood, and locked up for
observation. All she had to go by now were some older translations; she'd been trying to compare
those texts against the originals, to winkle out some new insight. So far, bupkis. And bupkis to
Buffy she did not want to bring.

She dragged her gaze away from the swimming text as Tara sat down and pushed a bottle of cold
tea across the table. Willow thanked her with a wan smile that grew real as she noticed her
beautiful girl had pulled her hair back. It set off her neck, showed off the gold pendant that had
been her most recent birthday gift. Sometimes Willow just wanted to call time on life, climb into
bed with her lover and lie there for hours, soaking up a happiness that would soothe away her
worries.

"How's it coming?" asked Tara, making an inquisitive, sympathetic face.

"It's coming along in a not sort of way," Willow grumbled.

Tara twisted out a grin. "A knotty problem, eh."

"Bad, naughty words." Willow slumped, groaning. "I'm getting all worded out. Whoever taught
demons to read and write should have had a second thought, which was, don't. Volunteer for a
literacy program, sure, guys, but don't teach the forces of darkness how to write the screenplays of
doom."

"Right," said Tara. "And where's the demon Melville? Or Jane Austen? Was it really worth it?" She
sounded earnest, but it was the goofy sort of earnest, which sometimes only Willow got. It was
okay, being the only one who got Tara. Just thinking of it tickled her happy bone, her bone of
contentment; then Tara began sliding her books into her carry bag.

Willow felt an immediate tug of regret. "You gotta go?" She hated sitting alone in the shop, with
only Anya for company.

"Mrs Dudley needs me to look after Kirsten tonight."

Making a face she hoped was eager puppy and not angst puppy, Willow said, 'I was thinkin'
maybe we could hang. Terminator II is on cable. And, you know, that's a lotta Linda. You
wouldn't want to miss that." I am certainly not nervous, she thought. Because that'd be crazy. We're
together again and we're good, it's all good.

Tara closed her bag and smiled at Willow. "You could come over." She sounded inviting to
Willow's ears, and yet...maybe there was a little something? A tiny note under that good cheer, of
impatience or irritation, buried like a pea under thirteen mattresses; and Willow was no princess
and couldn't quite tell, but even the faintest uncertainty made her resist having her suggestion
turned around. Tara knew she'd meant hang at Buffy's, where they could cuddle without worrying
whether someone would walk in.

"I always feel funny on the slipcovers," she said to Tara, hating her own stubborn perversity and
selfishness, but unable to stop the faint wheedling. "I don't like to be that slippery." She found herself
pouting and pulled her lip back into place, telling it to behave.
"I don't really like to ask Kirsten upstairs to my place," Tara said. She seemed uncomfortable. "I know I probably shouldn't be nervous, but...."

"No, I know. Plus, boundaries...good. Right?" And she flashed Tara a subdued look that was laden with double meanings and minor guilts, none of which she could control. The words flew from the deepest part of her like dark birds.

Tara looked at her, said firmly: "Willow."

"I'm not going to start," Willow said quickly, "I'm just saying, think how great it would be if you came back, and okay I started, but it would be so much better then how things are now, Tara. You wouldn't have to live above a smelly garage and clean other people's slipcovers, and it's not like there's any real kid-watching anymore. Dawn's practically grown now."

Her face gentling to a rueful look, Tara took Willow's hand and stroked it. "Honey, I know how much you want everything back like it was, but it's not that simple." Her lips parted as she took a visible breath. "You have to earn this."

Willow tried to hide her hurt, but it came out as grievance. "I'm earning, Tara."

"Yes, you are," Tara soothed. "You just need to give it time. What will be, will be."

"I'm not sure a cheery chorus of 'Que Sera Sera' really hits that reassuring note you're looking for, Doris." Sarcasm failed to obscure pain, and Willow's anxiety surfaced further. "And what does that even mean--what if what will be is something bad and lonely and ends in a hovel, me alone with forty cats, and one day I slip in the shower and break my neck and I'm eaten by starving kitties and end up as a freaky blurb in the Weekly World News?"

Tara asked curiously, humorizing her, "Would you ever adopt forty cats?"

"I might. You don't know how I might turn out, if I...I didn't have you." And why was it, thought Willow, that she kept stripping away layer after layer, laying herself bleeding at Tara's feet, only to receive in return that closed expression, those kind but distant eyes.

Tara didn't reply to what she'd said except to stand, lean over, kiss Willow's cheek. "Call me later, okay?" She slung her book bag onto her shoulder, and left with one parting glance.

After she'd vanished with a tinkle of bells and the absence of jasmine, Willow's hand clenched around her bottled tea and she wished she could make a frustrated gesture with it, like throw it across the room. Buffy got to toss knives around the shop, and Spike had been known to kick holes in anything handy when he was pissed. But not Willow, oh no. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been able to cut loose without the risk of someone giving her that nervous, knowing look. As if her anger were something abnormal, more significant than anybody else's.

"Que sera sera," Willow muttered to herself. She carefully placed the bottle aside, and got up from the table. Anya was over in the corner, repricing herb bags. She paid no mind as Willow went down into the basement. Downstairs, the dimness and clutter was somehow comforting and carried an old smell, dusty cool, not unlike libraries. She wound through the crates and trunks to the corner behind the stairs where the Futon of Sex was tucked away, not far from the trapdoor that led down to the tunnels. After a quick glance around to make sure she was alone, Willow pulled a small bookcase away from the wall and knelt to remove a plastic-wrapped book from within a grated vent.

She grimaced at the rumpled futon and pulled a blanket down to sit on, then flicked on the standing
lamp and curled up with Labrousse's *Dark Magicks*. She missed it kinda like she missed an old pal, and even if she didn't practice the dark spells any more, it comforted her in an odd way to flip through its pages. Certain spells made her smile with fondness, like looking at recipes for foods you couldn't eat anymore but once loved. And it wasn't that far off, she told herself. Some of the spells weren't even dark spells in the way people thought; just...richer. The tortes of magic, the tira misu. They'd helped so much when her own natural energies had ebbed to their lowest--had helped all her friends too, though her friends didn't like to remember that.

"'The Far-Sighted Eye,'" she read aloud, reaching the page she knew she'd seen before. "Will bring the bearer visions of consequence and futurity, of actions taken or untaken." She bit her lip and then worried it between her teeth as she read through the ingredients and the casting. She'd never tried this one before, though tempted. Now, though...she had to. Had to know how it turned out with her and Tara. Would they work? Really--was it worth even trying, going on like this, like a turtle of pain and heartbreak crawling along blindly toward what might end up to be a freeway, when she could know for sure?

One little dip into that old black magic, after all this time, couldn't hurt.

She put the book down and dug her cache of ingredients from the vent, sitting down on the floor with book and box and working slowly through the recipe. Draw the power circle in sand, burn seven red candles, toss one pinch of salt, one sage, and a few more elements less savory, while saying,

"I offer to Czaradian this salt / Your powers buy, with reverence exalt / With sage I burn away the veil I see / To bring your wiser vision into me / With blood I show my will and heart be true / And offer this my body unto you / With eyes of mindless sacrifice and vow / I beseech thee: fly your presence to me now--"

She gasped as the candles flared and the cold snake of spirit filled her, winding behind her eyes and through her head, to settle there as a face fitted behind her own.

Czaradian, she said with her mind, reaching out tentatively.

Greetings, supplicant, the spirit said in a low, ominous rumble of thought. It paused before adding more lightly: Feel free to call me Czar, by the way.
Jack Daniels between his legs, a cigarette wedged between his white fingers. It was dark except for
the television, which cast flickering light across the floor and him. He didn't turn his head.
"Wondered if you were gonna stand there all night, sweet pea."

She opened the door further and beckoned Kerry inside. "Hey, Spike."

Spike inspected her with a lazy, drunken lack of interest, then caught sight of Kerry. After a
moment's startlement, he returned an accusatory look to Dawn. "What's this, Girl Scout drive?" he
asked, with an undertone of warning. "I'll take two boxes of Thin Mints then, and you can run
along, kiddies."

"Cool," Kerry said, wandering around the crypt and inspecting its contents. She sounded
marginally less bored. "So this is your vampire, huh. Nice wannabe pad, I admit. Very goth."

Dawn gave a silent, imploring look to Spike, who was gritting his teeth. "I'll have you know I pre-
date goth, girlie." He glowered up at Kerry as she walked obliviously past the television to
investigate a huge candelabra. "I am the bloody grandfather of goth."

"You really believe it, don't you?" Kerry said, turning around to look at Spike sympathetically.
"That's so sad."

"He is," said Dawn, aggrieved on his behalf, and on her own. "I mean, not sad, but--Spike, show
her," she pleaded. "You know." And even though she'd known him for years and was used to all
his scowls, she faltered slightly under his hard, cold gaze. "Go bumpy."

"This what I am now, a sodding sideshow?" He straightened in his chair, a thought passing across
his face. "Here. What is this? Buffy send you here?" Even angrier, he stood and tossed his bottle
aside, smashing it against the stone sarcophagus. Dawn jumped in her skin. "Well, you can go back
to her, Little Bit, and tell her to take her tests and shove them up her bloody--" Spike's jaw worked
abruptly as he fought for self-mastery, still gazing hard into Dawn's eyes in a way that made her
bones go cold and strange aches fire up elsewhere.

"Get out of here," he finally said. "And take this ignorant bint with you." Spike walked away, then
paused by a pillar to growl back at her more forcefully: "And watch you don't get yourself killed on
the way home, or I'll beat the life right back into your useless scrap of a mangled corpse if it's the
last thing I do before your sis rips my head off."

Dawn heard him cursing as he descended into the privacy below. Cheeks flushed, she snuck an
embarrassed glance at her friend. "Sorry," she muttered. "He's in a bad mood. They must have had
a fight."

Kerry raised her brows. "Dates your sister, huh? Wow. Blondie's got a bit more wild-side going on
than I gave her credit for."

"You don't even know," Dawn agreed glumly.

Willow glanced up the stairs as she came in, hearing faint sounds that suggested Buffy was home.
She looked into the mirror by the front door, self-consciously touching her temple and then
smoothing a lock of rumpled hair. Her eyes looked big and dreamy, but they were her own.

So, she said to Czar, I just what--do something or don't do something, and I see a vision of what will be or won't be?

There was a heavy sigh, which gusted like a wind through her head: The brains of your race are really very simple devices, not far above that of cows, if you would know the truth. One would think it a simple matter of imprinting a thought there once, to achieve a permanent record. And yet the imprint decays so ridiculously fast. I never cease to be amazed.

Willow made a face at herself in the mirror, thought defensively: Well, I'm a bit distracted, you know. You shifting around in my brain like jello in a mold, while my heart is all twisty, and my tummy growling. There's a lot happenin' tonight in the Willow hood.

She felt the spirit soften a bit, though grudgingly: As I said. As your volition engages to act, so then will you see the moment branch: what will be if you make that choice, what will be if you do not. You will see the events most likely to occur.

This wasn't quite the spell I thought it was, Willow grumbled inwardly. I thought it'd be all cool, like a mental View-Master, and I could just flip through and see what was going to happen from this point.

What is a View-Mast...oh, I see. You are a very silly creature.

Am not, thought Willow.

Are too.

Am not!

"You okay, Will?"

Willow jumped as Buffy appeared at her shoulder, a slight worried crease between her brows. "Wha-what? Oh, fine, yes. Good. Fabulous, even." Willow cleared her throat nervously after that demonstration of perky artifice.

Buffy peered closely at her. "Something wrong with your face? You were all squinty there for a minute. You didn't even hear me calling you."

"I, uh, thought I was getting a bump. A zit." Willow paused while Buffy stared rather blankly at her. "I'm not," she clarified.

"Well, good." Buffy turned and walked to the kitchen, and Willow followed, noticing the house's quiet; no television on, no radios squawking down from above.

"Where's Dawn?"

"At Kerry's. She called a little while ago. It's just you and me tonight." In the kitchen, Buffy opened a cupboard and stared inside, wearing a look that said she was knowing the inexorable sadness of pasta.

"How about pizza?" Willow pulled a flyer from the junk drawer and set it next to the phone. "A very ham-and-pineapple evening it could be, with thee and me." And thee again makes three, she thought as Czar murmured: Get anchovies.
"Pizza. I guess I could go for that." There seemed to be a certain forced cheer in Buffy's voice that matched Willow's own, and the idea of pizza gained points; pizza was for bonding and talking and maybe they both had something to say.

Willow put her hand on the phone and then froze as visions flashed through her:

She picked up the phone and dialed, the pizza came delivered by a heavy, freckled boy in a red cap, and they sat in the living room and ate it, Buffy lifting a gooey slice to her mouth at the same moment as Willow, both of them with eyes fixed to *Terminator II*...

...or she put the flyer back in the drawer and shook her head, and Buffy took a can of soup from the cupboard, and the scene shifted as Buffy removed a pan from the stove and poured it into two bowls on the counter. Lifting them, she gasped a soundless "Ow!" at one overly hot bowl, and it slipped from her grasp and clattered to the floor, breaking to spill soup across the tiles, barely missing her shoes as she jumped back.

It must have been only a split second, because Willow came back to find herself standing in the same spot with her hand on the phone, and Buffy still walking toward her to look over the flyer. One step to the next was all that had elapsed.

"Medium or large?" Buffy appeared to be examining the prices.

"You know," Willow said slowly, "I don't think I'm really in the mood for pizza after all." Because, after all, she had to test the power, didn't she.

Buffy put the flyer away. "Yeah, to be honest, it's a little heavy for me. I'm not that hungry. I was thinking soup--you want some?"

"Sure," said Willow. She sat down on a stool and watched as Buffy readied dinner.

Czar said: I prefer not to comment on how supplicants use their gifts, but truly I can say that never before have I traveled the distance of the ether and gifted one with my mighty powers to determine the fate of soup.

Shut up, said Willow. Remember, I can kick you out any time.

How fast their veneration fades, sighed Czar.

The scent of vegetable soup spiraled into the air, and the kitchen was warmer. Willow held her breath watchfully as Buffy turned from the stove, a towel around the pot handle, and carefully poured the soup into waiting bowls. She set the pot back on the stove, slid a spoon into each bowl, and then lifted them, speaking as she did. "There's some stuff on the dining room ta--ow!" One bowl fell as Buffy winced, and there was crashing and soup flying and Buffy jumping, and Willow laughed once with delighted amazement at the happeningness of it all.

Buffy for her sake looked equally amazed. "So glad my spaz is funny to you, Will. Maybe I should reconsider a career in sitcoms."

"I'm sorry," Willow said at once, almost entirely sincere. "Here, I'll clean that up." She took the paper towels from Buffy's hand. "I was just...having a, uh, funny thought; kinda struck me out of the blue. Nothing to do with the soupy tragedy that is your floor."

"Ohh," Buffy groaned mildly, bending over and brushing a wad of towels over herself. "Make that the soupy tragedy that is this skirt."
"Oh," Willow echoed, feeling more guilty.

"Hey, any chance you can do me a favor and run by the dry-cleaner's tomorrow on your way to school? I don't know how it happens, but I'm down again to clothes that should be burned, not worn."

Willow opened her mouth to answer, and the visions struck her:

She said yes, and tomorrow morning left the house with a handful of clothes draped over her arm. After parking outside the cleaner's, she scrounged for change in her wallet, found none, and dashed inside leaving the car parked at the meter. When she returned, a meter maid was writing her a ticket...

...or she said no, and Buffy arrived outside the dry-cleaner's with messy hair and a bundle of clothes spilling from her arms, wearing a wrinkled, red-and-white striped shirt and orange stretch pants. A shirt fell and Buffy swore something in irritation and squatted awkwardly to retrieve it, then glanced up as two pairs of nyloned legs came into view, belonging to two old high-school classmates in businessgirl chic. As they passed they looked loftily down at her ensemble, and laughed to each other with pointed rudeness.

"Um, I'm going to be pretty busy all day tomorrow," said Willow, as she was snapped back to attention. "I have to run some errands so I won't be going the usual way in the morning, and I, I think I'll be staying late at the library. Sorry."

"Oh. Well, that's okay. No big."

Her guilt only extended so far, Willow decided. Besides, someone still deserved a little slice of payback for certain recent remarks about Wiccans and candles.

Spiteful little witch, aren't you, Czar commented blandly.

Am not!

Are too.

Later, lying on her bed after the remake of dinner and a non-existent conversation with a preoccupied Buffy, Willow thought about Tara. She rolled over on her side and stared at the clock, behind which stood a picture of her and Tara, arms around each other, heads tipped close. Nearly nine-thirty. The movie had already started, and Tara was probably watching it with Kirsten. Or not. Maybe that was a bit heavy-duty for a twelve year old, now that she thought about it. She could call, though, hear Tara's warm voice lapping against her lonely ear, and maybe go over there to hang for a while. The night could still have some goodness.

Willow reached out and picked up the cordless phone and felt the already familiar frisson of possibility in her head, visions like doors opening:

She called Tara, her own face happy as she hung up, and then a flash as she appeared at the door, Tara opening it to greet her, smiling. Flash as they sat together on the couch watching television,
Kirsten lying on the floor in front of them. Flash as Willow attempted to cuddle and Tara drew gently away. And flash, flash, flash, as they fought, in the Dudleys' kitchen, outside on the grass, and in Tara's apartment. A whole sickening series of shots, like boxcars collapsing in a train wreck: Willow's angry face as she yelled, Tara's angry face as she responded, Willow crying, Tara crying too, and Willow finally running out the door, leaving Tara alone with tears on her cheeks as she raised a hand to wipe them away...

...and she didn't call Tara. And Tara watched television with Kirsten, and the Dudleys came home with smiles and thanks, and Tara went up to her room and lay on her bed and stared, head on pillow, at her own unringing phone.

Willow returned to the moment, and carefully set the phone back on the table.

The outside of the apartment building was sedate at this time of night, suggesting a residence where young professional couples dwelled adjacent in rooms of reserved politeness, directing their tidy lives toward the milestones of adulthood.

"Watch it, watch it," Anya cried, incensed. "How dare you! Oh! Get your wheel away from mine!" She leaned to one side as they veered around the curve, her hands working furiously at her controller. Xander leaned with her, his own hands busy, and for a moment they battled in grim silence on the couch, each trying to take the lead, then abruptly both lurched in the opposite direction. Both wore looks of extreme concentration as they stared at the screen, though Anya's was a bit more maniacal. "You're going to make me crash!" she cried.

"An, this is competitive racing," Xander forced the words out through tight lips, which then parted in excitement as he caught her wheel and sent her spinning across the road. "Ha ha!" he laughed in triumph.

"You bastard!"

She flung her controller down, outraged, and then pounded her fists on her knees and stamped her feet. "Argh," she yelled rather loudly, then slumped. "I get all worked up! And then I crash! And you don't even stop to see if I'm okay, you just drive on, so like a man, always trying to be somewhere in a big hurry."

"And again, I say: racing," Xander said to the television, eyes fixed to its sweet curves. "But now I am a man alone. Alone in my car...on the open road...the bodies of friend and foe alike lying in scattered pieces behind me as I head west. Or maybe southwest."

She took the controller from him--at first he resisted but after a protracted struggle she finally wrested it free and threw it aside on the floor. He looked at her wild eyes and she looked back at him, and he looked at her lips and licked his own, and she looked at his lips and hers parted in answer, and as he looked up into her eyes, she looked up again into his.

"You magnificent bastard," Anya said, and pounced on him breathlessly.
Willow hadn't been able to sleep, thinking of Tara. Buffy had left to patrol, and Dawn seemed to be spending the night at Kerry's, and somehow Willow feared that in her solitude she might still pick up the phone, give in and call. Apparently she and Tara had a lot to say to each other that was going unsaid. Hard to tell what--she hadn't been able to hear any sound, so she didn't even know what she had been yelling, let alone Tara. She'd desperately wanted to learn those potential words, though, without actually hearing them in reality. If she knew the possibilities, she could do better than avoid this one fight: she could avoid any fights.

She'd tried the vision thing a few times again, picking up the phone; yet the images remained essentially the same, with only minor variations, all of them violent and silent, like an old-time movie, but without dialogue cards. Lip-reading had also failed.

I am eyes only, Czar had said.

And loneliness had led her thoughts in circles--pick up the phone, don't pick up the phone--so she'd run away from temptation. She hadn't even wanted to phone anyone else. Too risky. Now she approached Xander's door, hoping he wasn't asleep yet, and wishing even more strongly that Anya was, so that Willow could sit and talk with her oldest friend alone, have him say just the right things, as he always did when there were no big evils distracting them both, or coming between them. He was the stalwart guy friend, the one who made you feel special and amazing even when everyone else looked at you and looked away.

She raised her hand to knock on the door and heard a happy shriek from inside, answered by Xander's slightly deeper laugh. And as she hesitated with her knuckles one inch from the door, the prelude of vision seized her mind. She groaned. "Oh, fu--"

And she saw herself turning away, and going home, and inside the apartment Xander and Anya rolled with a thump to the floor and grappled, shoving aside each other's clothes in haste, and Willow had one sharp flash of Anya with her head thrown back in a soundless cry, and then the other woman's head dipped forward again with the gentlest smile as she looked down, down along her body in its blue dress to where her hands cupped around a huge belly. And she looked up, face anxious and in pain, from the flat moving surface of a gurney, and Xander was running at its side, holding her hand, and they were en route to birth, except that the darkness of Anya's face was not normal, not quite, and Willow fell deeper into the vision at the stark terror in Anya's eyes, and in Xander's, his face coming undone like she'd never seen it before, beyond panic, beyond pain, in someplace that was his worst nightmare coming real, and he stood there in lost shock as the doctor came from the operating room and dropped his mask and shook his head, a dark stain on dark blue scrubs, and then Anya wept in despair, in Xander's arms, her face crumpling with tears and open sobs as he held her...

...and Willow knocked, and they sat on the couch and watched television, and ate popcorn, and Anya's eyes sent daggers her way until the moment when she flounced off, leaving Willow on the couch gripping Xander's hand, begging him to stay with her, to talk, because she needed him so much right now, she needed to talk tonight, no, don't go to bed, Xander, don't go to bed.

Willow gasped as she was thrown free of the vision, and frantically raised her hands to the door and pounded with fists and then flat palms, then jabbed her shaking finger at the doorbell over and over again, crying out loudly, "Xander! Anya! Let me in!"
Tears trembled in her eyes and spilled, and she couldn't hear anything over her own noise, but the door abruptly opened and Xander stood there with shirt undone. He looked at her for one moment in stunned incomprehension, then pulled her quickly inside. And Willow with wild gaze scanned him up and down, taking in the half-zipped zipper and unbelted belt, and she looked desperately over at Anya, who was standing up and smoothing her hair with an expression that managed to be both alarmed and annoyed.

"God, Will, what is it, what is it? Are you okay?" Xander took hold of her upper arms a bit too strongly. "Is it Buffy--Tara--what's happened?"

She fell into his arms, crushing herself against his chest as if her heart would break. "No, it's me, it's me, it's just me."

And she prayed that it was not already broken.

Buffy had not gone to his cemetery to slay that night. And she'd told him to leave her alone, until she was ready, so there was no reason to expect him anywhere else. But as she walked across the grass, she found herself looking around, as if he might step out from behind a tree or tomb, smoking and watchful, keeping careful distance but giving her his protection.

She dragged her fingertips along the curved heads of gravestones as she passed, some rough glittery marble, some smooth, and she didn't look down. She was alone. So what? Didn't mean she had to be lonely. And she could slay all by herself. That was what slayers did, after all. It was a long one-woman tradition, and she'd had it good, fighting alongside vampires and friends, but it was okay to be here now, alone. Like Superman, in his Fortress of Solitude. Except hers was a big cemetery filled with dead people, and with--

Him. Over by the side of a small but fancy crypt. A long black coat, a striking blond head of hair, bent over something (lighting a cigarette or someone (no, never again)).

"Spike," she said, halting as uncertainty and fear twisted her gut.

And it turned, holding its prey at arm's distance with casual disdain, and was not. Not Spike, but an utterly different vampire with uglier game face and a tee-shirt that said, "Lumberjacks Do It with Big Wood." The vamp snarled and the girl--dinner was a girl--whimpered. Even from yards away Buffy could see a small trickle of blood dribbling down her neck, but she looked livable.

"Hey," said Buffy, tilting her neck and pointing to her jugular. "One hundred eighty proof, right here. Slayer, straight up. C'mon." She smiled invitingly. "You know you want it."

The vamp dropped the girl, and came for Buffy at a furious lope. Up close she didn't know how she'd ever mistaken him for Spike, but the passing likeness and her own moment of fear lent some kind of special rage to her fighting. Lashing out, she kicked high and hard on a spin and sent the creature staggering back, then turned without stopping and leapt at him, both feet, with a gravity-defying force that wowed even her sometimes. She landed back on her feet and threw herself on his fallen form, plunging her stake in his chest as she landed. Left straddling dust, she rose and brushed herself off and went to the girl's side.
"Hey. You okay?" She kept her tone brisk. The girl was wearing a pink shirt, for god's sake, and had come to a cemetery, probably to make out with the lumberjack. She helped the girl up, noting the glazed eyes and pasty face. Shock. "Okay," sighed Buffy. "Just take it one step at a time." She was dead weight as Buffy supported her and began walking streetward through the graves. But at least not dead.

Looking up to make sure she wasn't leading them smack into a tree, Buffy saw two figures standing by the railed fence, watching her. She thought at first they were vamps, but something was off. They wore identical outfits, grey trenchcoats with old-fashioned suits underneath, and--wait, she knew the word--fedoras. That was it. Under the brims of their hats, their faces were nearly identical, too, and sort of wrongly dark, like they might be green or grey if there was enough light to tell. Demons, she thought. One of them was scribbling in a small notebook; the other had its hands or whatever else might be down there shoved in its pockets.

"Hello," Buffy called, "Not signing any autographs tonight, but I could use some help here." She didn't really think they were autograph hounds, but they were just standing there out in the open watching her walk toward them, and she had to say something.

At her words, they looked at each other, then the writer flipped his notebook shut, tucked it in his pocket, and walked off, followed by his companion. They strolled unhurriedly through the open gate and down the sidewalk, and Buffy, curiosity piqued, tried to hasten after them despite the burden of Shock Girl. By the time she reached the street, though, they were gone.

In the early morning as the birds twittered, Dawn unlocked the front door and stepped quietly inside. No big need to feel guilty, 'cause she'd called to check in, no matter that it was from a pay phone, and she'd legitimately spent the night at Kerry's instead of going with her to the river like they'd first talked about. So she'd stayed on the marginal side of good. And yet she still felt like Buffy might take one look at her face and read all her secrets there.

She looked to both sides as she passed the living and dining rooms, but no big sister. She bounded upstairs. Buffy was coming out of her room carrying a full laundry basket and wearing a hideous red and white striped shirt and orange stretch pants.

Looking her up and down with exaggerated marvel, Dawn shook her head. "Wow, did someone mug you and steal your fashion sense? I bet they feel gypped."

"Ha ha." Buffy sniffed at her. "You smell like cigarette smoke."

Dawn tried not to stiffen. "Well, you know Kerry. Pack a day. I tell her, 'Smoking Kills,' but she's all, 'So does life.'"

"She's a proper little nihilist, isn't she," said Buffy sourly, propping her laundry basket on one hip.

"She's an anarchist," corrected Dawn, defending her. "She believes in dismantling the capitalist state."

Buffy raised her brows. "Uh huh. 'Cause we'd all be so much better off, roaming free with the deer and the bunnies and, oh, the big pretty demons."
Dawn rolled her eyes. "I didn't say I agreed with her. At least she has a philosophy."

"I have a philosophy," began Buffy brightly.

"Yeah," Dawn snarked, cutting off the sisterly wisdom, "Kill monsters. That's not a philosophy, that's a reaction."

That earned her a moment's startled look, and a strange frown. "My philosophy is far more complex," Buffy replied after a moment, resuming a brighter surface. "Kill monsters. Eat the vegetables first. No white shoes after Labor Day."

Dawn had to smile a little. "I gotta change before school," she said, but she hesitated a moment, added, "Thanks for letting me stay at Kerry's last night, on a school night and all."

"Well, the occasional school-night homework and toenail-painting session wasn't exactly unheard of back in the day," Buffy admitted. "It seems only right to keep up a grand Summers tradition."

"I always thought 'homework' meant 'demonology'," Dawn said dryly, "and 'toenail-painting' meant...okay, well that probably meant toenail-painting. 'Cause you always have nice toes."

The look on Buffy's face was pricelessly sweet, and made Dawn wish she said things like that more often. "Thank you," said her sister with genuine warmth, and a tiny bit of humor in her lips, as if she were aware that her pride was silly but was indulging it anyway. And she stroked Dawn's face as she walked by on her way downstairs.

Feeling more guilty than when she'd first arrived home, Dawn went into her room, shut the door behind her, and dug a pack of cigarettes from her purse. She looked around for a place to hide them. Dresser, no. Mattress, tch, right. Closet...maybe. She found her battered old Thundercats lunchbox on the top shelf and tucked the pack inside under a handful of letters and postcards. Once the evidence was stashed, she felt much safer.

Willow took care to shut the door behind her quietly. Even though everyone was probably up, she felt like a morning mouse, with a need to tread light. She slid her jacket off and hung it on a peg. She didn't look into the mirror as she walked by.

Minutes later as she was eating a bagel and tracking the daily murder count in the newspaper, Buffy came and sat down with a cup of coffee. She was wearing the Outfit of Shame, and its blinding stripes struck Willow with fresh guilt. The edges of her friend's everyday face suggested tiredness, or maybe something else. Buffy could be hard to read, not unlike her own face in the mirror. Misery came in so many subtle flavors for them, in Sunnydale.

"Hey," Willow said.

"Morning." Buffy doled out a little smile. "You stay over at Tara's?"

Willow flinched momentarily, but the question held only the innocent interest of someone who followed other people's love lives to compensate for her own.
"No," she said quietly. She folded the newspaper back into neat sections. "I, uh, went over to
Xander's. Hung out, ended up sleeping on the couch." Wakefully, listening for squeaky mattress
springs and moans, until she dropped into fitful nightmares that she forgot the instant she opened
her eyes and Czar said: Good morning. In the hallway before she left, Willow had buttonholed
Xander and worked up the courage to deliver a stuttering, discursive lecture on safe sex, which
unsurprisingly had not gone over too well, though at least she could say that she'd confused him
more than annoyed him.

Her horoscope advised: You should plan a small intimate dinner for two.

Yeah, her day was off to a great start.

"I saw something in the cemetery last night--Peaceful Acres."

Glad for something other than her own troubles to think about, Willow shoved the newspaper aside
and cradled her coffee mug. "What kind of something?"

Buffy hesitated, ducking her lashes in slight abstraction as she searched her memory. "I don't really
know. Maybe it's nothing. There were these two guys--demons, I'm pretty sure. I think they were
there when I dusted this vamp. One of them was taking notes, kinda like a watcher. They took off
when I called to them. I couldn't follow; I had a girl attached to my hip."

Willow felt a touch of amusement. "Oh?" she teased.

"Shock and blood loss, and stop thinking those thoughts." Buffy smiled.

"I'm telling ya--you ever want to convert, sister, I get a new toaster oven for making the recruit.
And you get a plaque with your name on it, plus a button to wear." Willow grinned, enjoying the
moment, then got serious again. "So was there anything else distinctive about these guys?"

"No, not rea--oh, they were wearing fedoras. And trenchcoats."

Willow frowned. "Okay. That's quirky. I'll try and find out something. Look through the Big Book
of Baddies, see if anything jumps out at me. In the non-literal sense." She made a mental note, then
eyed Buffy, who was sitting with head tilted to one side and downcast, staring at the patterns in the
tablecloth, as if they hadn't just been talking. Brooding, she looked as if she were completely alone.
As if she might not notice if Willow got up and left, now that her purpose had been fulfilled.

"Was there something else?" Willow asked, torn between gentleness and a slight annoyance. It was
an impression she sometimes had, that she was peripheral to Buffy's life; an accessory, like Witchy
Willow, pal to Slayer Barbie, now sold separately. But maybe that self-absorption was just the
slayer curse, the one that balanced out the selfless deeds.

Whatever the case, she should have been used to it by now.

"What?" Buffy said, looking up in brief surprise as she was drawn from preoccupation. "Oh. No.
Sorry." She paused. "I mean...yes. Not about the demon guys but," she faltered, "about another
demon guy." Her gaze flicked over Willow's as if checking for approval there before broaching the
subject.

"Spike," Willow said noncommittally.

"Yeah." Buffy paused again, as if unsure what to say, or how to say it.

"You two have a fight?"
An annoyed frown dug in between Buffy's brows. "Why does everyone assume we've had a fight whenever he's not around? It's like all this last week, 'Oh, where's Spike, you two have a fight?'"

"Maybe," Willow suggested, "It's 'cause you do? I mean, that's usually the reason." She offered a squinty face that wasn't actually apology, but matter-of-factness. "But okay, you didn't have a fight."

"No, we had a fight," Buffy grumbled. "Some jerky guys were ribbing us, and he got all Mister Macho Vamp, up in this one guy's face, and I swear to god, Will, he reminded me so much of Angel right then, I wanted to--" She broke off, steaming. "And Riley, too, which I know sounds crazy." She shook her head once. "I want to blame him, have it be a Spike thing. But it must be a guy thing, all that testosterone."

"Well, setting aside the trickier question of vamp biology," and how much I'd like to blame it on Spike, she thought, "I'd say yeah." Willow tipped a half-smile at her friend, lifted her brows. "Men gotta be men." And slayers had to be slayers, in a way that wasn't very different, but that wouldn't be helpful to point out, she suspected. "They got that inner wolf."

"Unfortunately Spike has an inner something else, and it went outer." Buffy's eyes glanced off Willow's. "He vamped right there in front of the coffee shop, with kids all around."

"Oh," said Willow, as she understood now. "Oh dear."

"It was quick," said Buffy, staring into her coffee cup, eyes lost again. "But it...it really hit me. That I," she seemed to consider her words with care, "I couldn't trust him not to do that again. And there's the chip, but...I don't know. We were in the middle of town, and everyone was so normal, except for him and me. And I'm never going to be the full normal, but maybe I'm not even giving myself a chance. I don't want to be someone who ignores the signs, who can't see when the corner has been turned, when it's just a dead end ahead."

She looked at Willow, face stripped of surface, showing everything that trembled inside her. Confusion deeper than anxiety. "What am I doing, Will? I mean, god, is it just time to let go?"

She wasn't fishing for mere advice, it was more than that; she was inviting full-scale intervention, and as the question left Buffy's lips, Willow felt relief. You waited for this kind of opportunity, to say what needed to be said to someone who hadn't been ready or able to hear it before. It was the friend moment, when you could return favors owed, and as Willow's lips parted to speak,

A sheet of light flashed across her mind's eye.

And she said to Buffy, watching her own lips move, her head nod firmly: Walk away. Walk away from him, Buffy. He's wrong, this is wrong, and it needs to stop. Buffy's face altered as she finally got the truth and, shockingly, began to cry. And in a flash forward, Willow saw Buffy enter Spike's crypt, saw them face to face, Spike's raw and disbelieving, Buffy's hard, and then time accelerated, whipping her along, flashes of sight arriving like stations passed in a subway car: the two of them fighting among broken gravestones--as Spike fell to his knees in helpless tears, face battered, while Buffy turned and walked away--to the empty crypt cellar, where she stared at his abandoned bed--to the magic shop where she sat alone reading, strange emptiness in her eyes as she glanced up--and worked over the punching bag with frantic blows--fists lashing out as if into Willow's own inner eyes, sending her reeling back as Buffy spun and kicked one vamp, dusted another, face grim and then increasingly scared as she looked around and found herself surrounded not by one more vampire or three, but a dozen. Willow wanted to tell her to run, and Buffy as if hearing her tried, but was cut off. So she fought. Fought until she was staggering, until the moment when she realized this was it, her last battle, that knowledge passing across her face as a hand cut off her silent gasp,
drew her head back against one shoulder. The vampire's fangs bared in a smile before it drank, and-
- and Buffy still had fight left in her, Willow could see it--her face wasn't tired with surrender, but
tough, wavering only as if she struggled with some decision. She clenched a stake, flexing up...then
paused and lowered her hand again, and let the stake fall, and everything Willow thought she'd
believed and understood fell with it, a cracking wrongness as if the stake pierced her own heart, as
Buffy relaxed to wait, her breath hitching in slower rhythms, as something within her eyes began
moving slowly away, then left those rooms empty...

...and she shook her head, covered Buffy's hand with her own, said something that made Buffy look
bemused, dubious, and finally somewhat reassured. And Spike walked into his crypt and pulled a
 taped note from the television and read it carefully as a tiny smile broke across his lips, and he
drew Buffy close outside the Bronze to kiss her, and Buffy arched her neck back and rested her
head against his shoulder, her own shoulders bare, her face lost in ecstasy as Spike, vamping,
traced with his fangs the curve of her neck where it pulsed, and then a whiter, almost blinding flash
broke, and she saw Spike in strange uniform, standing boots-deep in a landscape of snow under a
broad, pearly grey sky, gesturing urgently with arm outstretched as Buffy raced to him--but no
cemetery, no fight, no death, nothing but the two of them together in a vision Willow wished she'd
never seen.

A vision she tumbled out of, feeling that lives had passed and too much was now known; but Buffy
was still looking at her expectantly in the moment she'd left, eyes asking her help. Willow touched
her cheek by reflex and found it dry of tears. It wasn't grief she felt, exactly, but horror and
confusion.

Anything is possible, Czar whispered seductively, suggestively. Even if some paths are more likely
than others.

Too much, thought Willow, as she began stammering out an answer, playing for time. "I think...I
think..." Too much responsibility, having Buffy precariously balanced between life and death and
hanging on her next words. How could her words, ordinary non-witchy words, have that much
power? Maybe she could just say: Buffy, you need to make up your own mind.

She looked into Buffy's eyes, which held a vulnerability and trust she rarely revealed anymore, to
anyone.

"I think...you need to make up your own mind," Willow said with uncertainty, but fear gripped her
as Buffy's expression began to alter, like a door slowly shutting. "When it, when it comes down to
it," she added quickly. "But, but..." And, oh god, oh god, she thought with fluttering panic, what
the hell was she thinking, this was life and death. But what could she say? What had she said to
Buffy in the vision, to make her go to him? I got nothing, thought Willow, turning out her mental
pockets and finding them empty. No argument presented itself to her that would let Buffy take
Spike back, because she didn't want that for her friend.

She didn't want death, either.

"But what?"

"Th-th-this normal thing," Willow stammered, words tumbling out from somewhere as she tried not
to hyperventilate. "This thing you want so bad, Buffy. I gotta say, you know, the time might have
come to let that--to let that go. Is what I'm thinking," she added lamely. At the puzzled look on
Buffy's face, she struggled on. "It's like you have this dream, from when you were, like, fourteen,
and your dad and mom were fighting and you wanted everything to be back the way it was. And
you'd probably be messed up if it was only that, anyone would be. But now you're the slayer, and
it's like you want everything to be all la la la, pink houses and happy kids and, and, and--"
Anchovies, said Czar, as she floundered for a word.

"--anchovies," finished Willow, then corrected herself with a sigh of impatience: "Not anchovies. Cookies, or, or something. Perfectly round little cookies, all the same size."

"Cookies," repeated Buffy, confused.

"I'm saying," Willow took Buffy's hands, truth springing up from where she hadn't expected it, "You want normal, but no one's normal. Not even the normal people are normal, Buffy. They drink and fight and cheat on each other. They hurt each other. And some of them aren't much better than demons. And, you know, look at me. I'm not normal. I'm gay and a witch and sometimes I do stupid things like drink too much. I don't fit in either. None of us do." Willow squeezed Buffy's hands.

"So, wait," Buffy said skeptically, and her blonde hair bobbed a bit, to go along with the boggle. "You're saying that I should stay with him?"

"Well at this point, what's the big?" said Willow, evading a direct answer and not believing her own flippant rhetoric. She was angry on some level, but she was trapped by her knowledge; it wasn't as if she could test this.

"What's the big?" Buffy repeated in amazement. "Are you sure you're Willow?"

"Uh, yes?" Willow, thrown off guard, blinked. "Yes."

"You should never have to think about that question," Buffy warned, voice dry but not entirely joking.

"I'm not thinking. I'm saying, yes, all right, it's a big, and I want you to be happy, which is not something Spike brings to mind. But at least he can protect you, and he cares. It's weird, and I know maybe I haven't said it before, but I, I worry less when you guys patrol together."

Buffy grimaced a little, but her face had softened with what might be resignation. "So, what, I have a relationship based on sex and violence? How very R-rated of me."

"Buffy...you're not just noticing that now, are you?" Willow wondered in amazed alarm. At Buffy's answering expression, she had to smile.

"Oh god," Buffy muttered, gently drawing her hands away. "This is all so--"

"Hey," said Dawn, arriving in the doorway and chewing a Pop-Tart. She looked back and forth between their startled faces and seemed to realize she'd walked in on something. "So, uh, who's taking me to school?"

Buffy rebuilt her control and straightened in her chair. "I am. Willow has some errands to run. Let me just grab my dry-cleaning--"

"No," said Willow suddenly.

Raising her brows in doubt, Buffy said, "Or I could just be wacky, clown-girl Buffy."

"No, I--I don't have any errands any more," said Willow. "I'll take the clothes to the cleaners, drop Dawn off."

"Thanks, Will."
If I can make a vision come untrue, Willow said to Czar, maybe other possibilities aren't so impossible.

Wake me for the exciting moment, Czar said sourly.

Willow grabbed her wallet and checked it as she left the house with Dawn, jingling the change. As they drove, Dawn rambled on about friends and classes and the horror of Friday meatloaf, while Willow stared tiredly at the sun glancing off the windshield, its light not unlike the flash of visions arriving, like light on new coins, and as they pulled up to the school Dawn said, "Oh no." She patted her pockets, groaning. "I forgot my lunch money." She turned an expectant face at Willow. "Can I scam a few bucks? I'll pay you back."

"What?" Willow felt shock grip her, cold fingers on a warm morning. "I don't--no, wait," she said quickly as Dawn grabbed her wallet and dumped its coins into her palm. "Take the bills. I need the change."

Dawn glanced in. "No bills," she said, and hesitated. "If you need it, I guess I can see if Kerry has any cash." Nothing in her oh-so-innocent face shifted as she shrugged and added with the skill of a master guilter: "Or one of the teachers."

"Uh, no," said Willow, frowning. "I guess it's okay. Go ahead. I can stop at the bank." As she drove off, Willow jittered her hands against the steering wheel and muttered, "No problem. Get some change, make some change."

Ha, she thought in triumph as she pulled in front of the cleaners with her quarters. Here I am putting in the money, here I am cranking the handle. And, extra time set, she carried in Buffy's clothes, and when she came out again the meter maid was glancing at Willow's meter and walking on.

"I did it," Willow cried, alight with wonder and a sense of relief that would have been ridiculous if it hadn't meant so much more. The meter maid paused inquiringly, pad in hand. "I changed it," she told the woman, grinning and jabbing a finger excitedly toward the meter, "It didn't happen the way it was supposed to--I made it different, and I know you have no idea what I'm talking about, but you were going to give me a ticket and you haven't and it's all wrong except it's right, it's very right."

The woman turned her head a notch to consider the meter, then looked at Willow. "Put enough change in, you don't get a ticket," she said blandly. "Simple as that, hon." And she walked on.

Willow's face slowly fell.

"Right," she said as it sank in. "Simple." And so much else depended on other people and factors, unknown quantities independent of her will, combining together in ways impossible to predict. "Nothing else is that simple, is it."

Very little, I've found, said Czar soberly. Though I will add parking meters to the short list.

After a pause, he added: You know, I once thought of being a meter maid. But the uniforms were
so deeply unattractive.

"You can shut up again now," said Willow, and the man passing by in the trenchcoat looked at her strangely.

All day in and out of classes, Willow had tried to make no big decisions, and given serious thought to the idea of cutting Czaradian loose. The spirit wasn't exactly what you'd call a holy terror, but its gift of visions was. What did it say about the lives they lived, she and her friends, that two decisions in twenty-four hours could rip the delicate web that bound them together and lead to death? And what did that say about her decisions themselves--how many other careless choices did she make every day that might impact them all? What if some action she'd taken or not taken, some word left unsaid, had contributed to Buffy's last death? Hadn't her kiss with Xander nearly brought about Cordelia's?

Some part of her had hoped to avoid Tara for as long as possible, but some other part of her, namely her feet, took her to the magic shop by habit and Tara was of course there. Beautiful lover, hair loose, parted criss-crossy along the line of her bent head, one page of a history book sandwiched gently between thumb and finger as she frowned at whatever she was reading.

Willow brushed past a customer in purple wizard robes to sit at the table, and then spared an anxious glance for Anya, who was yammering away on the phone, twirling the cord around one finger.

"Hey," Tara said, smiling and then tilting her head as her eyes widened. "And wow, your aura is funny today."

"There's a lot of humor in my head."

"You've got some layers, blue on green," said Tara. "I should look that up--"

"I was sniffing the herb stash earlier," Willow said quickly, opening her laptop. She didn't meet Tara's eyes. "Bunch of different stuff. Making sure they were fresh. They're probably all jumbly now, mixin' up the magic."

"Scent is very powerful at evoking emotion," acknowledged Tara, her jasmine girl. Willow made herself look up and smile, but Tara still appeared troubled. "But it's darker, too," she observed, considering the curves of Willow's head, then dropping her eyes to hold Willow's questioningly.

"I'm a, a little sad," said Willow, and that was too much the truth; she thought of their unsaid words, their unfought fights, and shoved those worries into a different box. "And frustrated. This prophecy still won't come together."

Tara nodded, and seemed to accept this. "You'll get it," she said as confidence expanded across her face, confidence for her, Willow. "You have that gift for language." She smiled. "Even when it's all tortured and demony."
"A deadly heart, Beloved, have I worn / On ragged sleeve and willing arm you spurn / While with braver lovers you dug your grave / And left me in my own, alone, forlorn..." 

Spike paused. "Worn, spurn, forlorn," he muttered, and stared at his notebook with a studious frown that slowly dissolved into disgust. "Sod this." He tore out the page, crumpled it as he did, and threw it at Oprah's face, off which it bounced to land in a snowy pile around the base of the television. He chucked the notebook after it, and unscrewed the cap on his whiskey bottle. He drank, shifting further down into his chair, wiped his mouth off, then recited to Oprah, 

"They fuck you up, these bloody bints. / And bitches damn well mean it, too. / They bugger up the whole damn world / And ram in deeper, just for you."

"I-I've got it," said Willow, disbelieving, and waved her hands around as she looked up from her screen, nearly knocking over the latest of several high-octane sodas. "Oh, oh, oh!" But no one answered because the shop was empty, and, oh yeah, she'd told them she would close up. A bright circle of light enclosed the table where she worked, throwing the rest of the store into deeper darkness; it was nearly late enough for sleeping. 

Hey, you, she cried to Czar. Wake up!

The spirit stirred: I was listening to a Mozart concerto you have stored in your seventh-grade memory cells, interestingly associated with impressions of your mother's sexual peccadilloes and a hatred of pickles that you later outgrew.

Shush, Willow said excitedly. And stop messing with my mother's pickles. "I think I've got it cracked," she said aloud. "I sorted out three possible meanings for the key Naciran word used in the prophecy, kvaffnyk-katuuri-jvetai-au, and they're all kinda sorta the same, variations on a theme, but when I was looking at the entire passage I started seeing all these patterns that didn't match the rest of the text--what no one got is that it's also a numeric code, and a pun too. Every passage probably does something similar, but differently, different patterns. It's really clever, and actually much more specific than anyone would think, because it's pointing to an older work of Fenwhar's on demon races, with historical notes and attack patterns and portents. And we have a copy!"

Willow flapped her hands up and down in the air and made small whooshing sounds as she tried to calm herself down, as if fanning off a hot chile pepper. "I'm, I'm loopy," she said breathlessly. "And I'm thinking that's not the most appropriate emotion because I'm pretty sure I'm about to find out something really horrible, but I did it, I did it!"

As when you put the coins in the meter? inquired Czar.

"Phffttt," said Willow. "That was nothing." But the reminder was enough to erase her grin and bring about a measure of calm. She rose from the table and went to a nearby bookshelf. "The
Fenwhar should be...mm, no. Upstairs." She climbed, then knelt down in front of the shelves where the more dangerous books were stored.

"Oh yeah," she said, spotting the text's heavy brown leather cover and faded embossing. "Come to ma--no, no, oh hell!" Willow groaned, and then,

Then her eyes closed as her head lolled forward; she curled over on herself breathing in short, shocked gasps as everything shifted, not like the other visions, not at all. It was as if something huge were trying to fill her body, fill a bottle with a vast ocean, and she cried at the pressure in her head and chest, and as the pressure built to pain built she screamed and arched with hands to her skull, snapping her head back and eyes open, seeing the world through a scrim entirely dark, that covered her eyes and spilled out, swallowing the world as,

...she pulled the book from the shelf, and opened it, and read. Brought the book to their next meeting, told them what the prophecy meant, her finger pointing as she spoke aloud, showed them the pictures, explained what was to come. And, armed with that paltry knowledge, they went forth to the portal and waited for the armies of evil, with their silly little weapons, their tiny band, and it opened as was foretold. The demons came, countless, marching, and all defenses fell apart, as did their own fragile human bodies, matchsticks blown out and scattered by a storm, and,

...she pulled the book from the shelf, and opened it, and read. Brought the book to their next meeting, told them what the prophecy signified, and with guilt on her downcast face admitted to the visions--pointed to her head, waved a hand back and forth to convey yapping with Czaradian, told her stories, as the others listened. And armed with that knowledge, they went forth to the portal better prepared and waited for the armies of evil, with their silly little weapons, their tiny band, and it opened as was foretold. And the demons came out, countless, marching, and the magicks they'd believed strong were not strong enough, and they fell. Xander gutted, Anya's neck snapped, Spike going down in a hail of blows until he was dust, Buffy hanging on longest with Willow and Tara, but falling at last, head rolling to rest next to Xander's body, and Tara, Tara, her face turning to Willow's as she was lifted by soldiers and ripped away, their clutching hands breaking apart, both of them sobbing and wild and screaming and reaching for one last touch, and then Tara coughed once and spilled blood as she looked surprised and then looked at nothing, and,

...she took the book from the shelf and didn't open it, and hid it away where it would remain unseen, and she shook her head at Buffy, who looked at her with a frown of disappointment that would only grow deeper, and the portal opened as was foretold, and the armies came forth, and a darkness fell over the land, and vampires walked by twilight next to demons in uniform, and humans cowered. Mists rolled in, or smoke from fires, and Spike materialized from the fog in uniform, cape swinging around him, head tilted as he lit a cigarette, indifferent to the roped, crying girls that a demon dragged by. And when he looked up, his eyes glittered at the chaos he surveyed, and he half-smiled. And in a flash of blinding whiteness, he vanished, and Buffy came into the
cave, tired face streaked with dirt, and tossed a sack in the middle of the table, and they sat and ate what was inside. And Willow saw, between stars of pain, a horned demon swirling a human lady around a ballroom floor--a girl tied to a bed, screaming as two demons in uniform began undressing--Xander lifting a gun over the top of a wall and firing enraged--Anya smiling at a customer across her cash register--Tara tossing a bolt of magic fire--Dawn frantically kissing a man whose face remained unseen--Spike grabbing Buffy as she fell from a roof--and Buffy, Buffy knifing a demon, Buffy twirling to kick away a vampire, Buffy running through a tunnel with soldiers on her heels and tossing ribboned scrolls across a table and kissing Spike and staking a vamp and cleaning a gun and kissing Spike and waving a spray of red blood from her face and crying alone by a wall and yelling at them all and kissing Spike as his face turned fiend against hers. And Buffy gasped as she was tossed to a floor roughly in chains, as a line of demons smiled in cold approval and someone's black boot came to rest on her hip...

...and in a short-circuiting blaze of whiteness, she was gone, and Willow found herself lying alone on the floor of the magic shop, her cheek pressed to its gritty surface, and she was staring at nothing but the real world. The world that she would end.

She hadn't been able to leave the book in the shop, so she carried it home with her, and hid it in the top drawer of her dresser, then stared at the closed drawer, hugging her ribs and biting her thumb as she tried to keep from adding more tears to her wet face. With a tiny flick of wrist and whisper, she bound the drawer with a spell to keep its contents undiscovered, and her face lost its tremble and crumbled entirely as she wept.

The usual coolness of Czar's voice sounded now like judgment, as he said: You have learned more than you wanted to know, young witch...as is so often the case.

"Get out!" screamed Willow, and slashed her arms along the top of the dresser, sending jewelry and bottles flying and the lamp crashing to the floor. "Fly back, begone, my will undone!" And she jerked a little as the spirit left her body with a rush of energy. Released, she let herself fall, twisting down into a heap on the floor, her back against the dresser. She drew her knees up and sobbed, she didn't know how long, an hour or just a minute, until warm hands touched her and she looked up into Tara's anxious face.

"Willow, what--"

"No, don't," said Willow, "Don't." And she sagged forward into Tara's arms, more sobs trying to squeeze out of her raw, hoarse throat. She only had a few left, though, and they dwindled as she was held, as grief became something speechless, more powerful than tears. "Tara," she said, because she couldn't say anything else, "Tara. I love you so much."

"I know you do," Tara said, easing next to her against the dresser, drawing Willow to her warm body, into her arms, folding Willow's head down against her neck and breast. Some of Willow's pain now laced her voice, braiding with anxiety. "I love you too."

"No," she cried, instinctively wanting to be safe in denial, to make Tara safe, even though those were the words she always wanted to hear. Always.
"I do," said Tara, kissing her hair.

"I'm so stupid," Willow whispered. "I never get smarter, I get stupider and stupider. I'm losing me, running out. More sands falling every day. Every--"

"Shhh," said Tara.

"I'm a disappointment to you," Willow said. More tears slipped loose against her will. "I wasn't what you thought. I know. I know." The knowledge nearly undid her.

"You are what I thought. I knew it the moment I saw you." Tara stroked her hair, laid her cheek gently against Willow's head. "That you were special."

"You saw my power." Willow said the last word with self-loathing. Her face felt hot and sticky, shamed. She stared at Tara's arm, just her arm, and a patch of carpet beyond it, and didn't see it. She didn't want to see anything. There would be no more seeing, there would be no--

"Yes," said Tara. "I did. But I saw you first. You had, um, this sweet flippy thing going on with your hair and an orangey shirt that kind of matched the color--and that skirt you used to wear, the one with the quilted hem. I remember 'cause it reminded me of how my mom used to fix up my cousin's old clothes; make them extra-pretty for me. And you," said Tara softly, "You were so pretty." She ran her thumb over a curve of hair, just above Willow's ear, a lulling touch. "And you always will be, to me. You're what I saw in that moment, and more. Never less, Willow. Never less, even after everything we've been through--and no matter what happens. You're not running out, sweetie. You're not."

But she saw the carpet. She saw it.

"What will be will be," said Willow.

Buffy looked for him as soon as she came through the door of the Bronze, but it was crowded with the usual mix of humans: high-schoolers who looked impossibly childlike to her now, those few college types whose nostalgia or alternative lifestyles brought them to the bad part of town, and one or two adults, terribly out of place but at least not vampiric.

Heads bobbed and bodies wove between one another, and she tried to catch a glimpse of black coat and blond hair through the crush. Girls were laughing around a table with beers; two guys shot pool with strict attention; over there, someone she knew from high school shouted and waved his hand across the room to friends; while nearby, a very debbie-looking chick in pearls and pleats began making out with a guy in black leather. Short black leather, though, and dark hair, and not what Buffy was looking for.

Maybe he isn't coming, she warned herself, as disappointment began to edge away her simple expectations. She'd come to think of him as on call, and beck too, and maybe that wasn't true any more. Yes, here I am folks, the only girl who can frustrate her stalker. She basted herself in self-mockery, and having made a full circuit of the dense, heated club, began to leave. And then she slowly turned, as the dancers under the sparkling light swayed back and forth, obscuring the glimpse she might have imagined, before shifting and parting to reveal him standing on the far side
of the dance floor, watching her with an unreadable expression, his face a silver coin against the shadows behind him.

The longing she felt at the sight of him caught her like a hook under her rib cage and she didn't know whether to walk over to him or wait for him to come to her, but the dancers kept moving, passing in front of her view, and when they thinned again, he was gone.

He was next to her.

Buffy looked up in wordless wonder as he materialized close enough to do her in, if he'd wanted to, and Spike looked down into her eyes, then his gaze dropped further as if he imagined undressing her, or just touching her gently, someplace in the privacy of his thoughts where only he knew for sure. She looked back. He wasn't wearing his coat; she would never have found him like this, in a white shirt, sort of like a pirate's blouse, but you wouldn't call a man's shirt a blouse, could you, though it was.

It was the whitest shirt.

He stroked her hair, ran his knuckles tenderly along the curve of her cheek, and Buffy closed her eyes. One song ended, another began, and she opened her eyes again and invited him to dance, still with no words, and he drew her out to the dance floor, and she thought he should be different in some way, that his face should be cool with mockery, that he should be wrong here, out of the shadows, surrounded by the swaying human couples under sparkling lights as sappy music played. But he moved with her as if he knew everything her body whispered, and as if he had been a secret waiting for this moment, something in white silk that you could discover, maybe, if you kept rubbing away the dark surface.

Lalethki snapped off the lamp, leaving the apartment in dimness, and sat down on the couch next to Avery. The man did not move to give room, merely pulled his grey overcoat an inch closer and stared straight ahead at the rondure, which remained unlit. Lalethki thought it inappropriate that Avery showed no deference, even if the human did outrank him in tenure. But it didn't matter. That, like so many things, would change soon enough.

"The general calls," said Clude, and everyone gathered in the room fell silent as the rondure began to glow. Its mists rolled apart as the partition breached here in this small orb, allowing General Nilec's visage to appear to them, and theirs to him, for their words to reach each other.

The general's face appeared frown first: lips set tightly together, hiding the teeth within, and then expanded to his grey, mottled skin and lastly to his eyes, which peered darkly and suspiciously from the ether to inspect them all.

Everyone in the room jumped up and saluted, sword arm to chest, then sat back down.

"Your report," said Nilec. "Summarize. Two minutes. My warlock is ill." He turned a face of disdain to something beside him that the others couldn't see. "Putrid vomit runs from his mouth even as I speak. Son of a rabbit."

"Sir," said Clude, flipping open his notebook. "We have scouted two new locations for possible
headquarters, identified all routes in and out of town, and tagged seven possible allies among the human population--one is a doctor, and three are," he hesitated over his word, "gangbangers." He peered over his glasses into the rondure. "They were witnessed beating a man in a parking lot for playing his radio too loud. Billy Ray Cyrus."

"I don't care what the victim's name is," said Nilec impatiently.

"Er, no, sir," said Lalethki. "The musician."

"Nor do I care of his employment."

"Of course not, sir," said Clude, shooting Lalethki an unspoken order for silence.

"One minute," said Nilec. "Or until this vomiting creature expires."

Clude flipped a page with haste, cleared his throat. "We have also discovered the existence of a slayer, sir. We'd heard rumors, but these are now confirmed as fact. We saw her fight--she appears formidable. If we could bring her to our side--"

"Every slayer is a rebel, and an enemy of our kind. Make note of where she lives and mark her for execution in the first wave, along with any family." The general's voice was dismissive, then grew sharp as he looked to one side again: "Those boots were cleaned not an hour ago. And will be cleaned again with your tongue...Soldier! Remove this man's tongue." He turned back to the rondure. "I take my leave."

They stood again with respect, and as screams sounded from the underworld, the general's face vanished quite slowly, beginning with the tips of his horns, and ending with his frown, which remained some time after the rest of him had gone.

The End

Chapter End Notes

This is not beta-read; Feel free to send feedback, excluding rants on how Spike/Buffy is evil, yadda.

The song playing in the next-to-last scene is "Somewhere in Between" by Lifehouse. (Behold the power of cheese!)

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
The little boy with the dirty hands stared at her across the counter silently as if he could sense something about her that other humans couldn't. Anya narrowed her eyes. From some instinct she attributed to the maternal part of her body, she wanted to wash his grubby hands and sticky face. She also feared he might touch the merchandise. He had a lollipop that made one cheek lumpy. And, strangely, he wore a brown suit that wasn't at all suitable. It looked like the kind of thing someone might unpack from an attic trunk, like the childhood garb of a grandfather, or a great-grandfather, not that she had either one of those, but it wasn't hard to extrapolate, once you watched enough television.

He was quite repulsive. And he kept staring at her, and making small piglike noises around his lollipop. She was not going to break first. She was an ex-demon, and he was a powerless boy, probably no more than ten. Powerless, and yet possessed of a horrible, basilisk stare not unlike what the screaming souls of the damned might see as they were conveyed naked and bleeding on giant hooks through the very gates of Gehenna.

"Hello, little boy," said Anya, smiling. "What can I do for you?"

His mannikin dominance satisfied, he shoved the flyer across the counter, then turned to leave.

"What is this?" Anya asked, picking it up and staring at it. "Carnival," she read. "One week only. Thompson's Field." She looked up to find him almost out the door. "Hey," she called. "You. Little boy." She clicked across the floor to him, and instead of running off like any normal child he waited with an unnatural readiness to enter another battle of wills. "Clearly, you expect me to hang this in my clean, sparkling window, on which you'll notice," she waved her hand, "no other flyers. Why should I divert our valuable business to yours? I have a strict policy of accepting no advertisements without a reasonable consideration."

She held out the flyer--as the bells above the door tinkled and Xander walked in--and kept holding it out while the boy stared at her, trying to bend her will to his. She glared back at the little bastard.

"What's up," said her honey, unable to pass by their stand-off. He took the flyer from her hand. "Carnival!" he exclaimed, in the voice of another ten year old. "Oh, man, oh man." He looked at the boy. "You got a Ferris wheel?" he asked. The boy nodded. "Fun house?" Nod. "Got the big top?" her idiot manchild asked with a grin. The boy nodded. "Don't talk much do you?" Xander said. The boy just stared, and the grin on Xander's face faded slightly as he stared back into the kid's eyes, growing mesmerized.

"Don't look at him," said Anya impatiently. "Don't play his game!"

Xander glanced at her, with a certain something in his expression. She thought of this as his 'Not Yet Irritated But Vaguely Thinking About It' Face. "He's just a kid, An."

"Trust me, I've seen plenty of big evil come in small packages."

She was trying to warn him, but she could see him brushing her off. "Begone wit' ya," he said with a fresh smile to the kid, who slipped around him and skedaddled out. He tried to hand the flyer over to Anya, but she refused to take it.
"I don't want that. You know my policy." She felt aggrieved. She hated it when he forgot things about her. And he was wearing his green shirt, the one she disliked, the one she'd told him not to wear this morning. On her mental tote board, she added that to the eggs he'd undercooked and a particular tone of voice he'd used when she walked in on him in the bathroom and commented on the odor. Four misdeeds, balanced against the tiny smile on his face when he woke up and looked at her, the morning sexual pleasure he'd given, his shower song about sacred sperm, the adorable way he'd wiggled his toes and spoken to them while putting on his socks, his promise to go shopping with her for new towels, the almost humorous joke he'd made about bacon, the way in which he'd handed over the funnies when he was done, and--

"It's a carnival," he said, as if that explained everything. He walked into the shop, forcing her to follow. As he tossed the flyer on the table, he caught her expression. Making an invisible frame with his hands, he said, "So you got your fun: movies, bowling, hangin' at the Bronze with your homies. For your big fun, add a few beers to the mix, maybe end the night with a rousing game of spin the tail on the bottle." She gave him a knowing look. Always with the sex. "Then," he said, tapping the flyer, "you have Official Big Fun, in which two-headed dogs are viewed, funnel cakes eaten, and sixty-foot heights of vomiting are sometimes achieved."

"Dogs? Funnels? Vomiting?" said Anya in horror.

Xander sat and got a distant, stupid look in his eyes as he smiled. "Man, I haven't been to a carnival since I was seven. The bustle of the midway, the heady scent of popcorn in the air, the lights of the great Ferris wheel turning and turning...." He paused, head swaying back and forth in the gyre of memory, then went slightly more glassy-eyed, put his hand on his belly, and burped.

"Oh my god, they've gotten to you," Anya said accusingly.

"Who?" said Xander in confusion.

"The carnies. When you were a child, they took advantage of your vulnerable human mind and converted you to their twisted ways. I've never trusted them. They have their own union, you know. You'll never see them calling a demon for vengeance. Always Gypsies." She sniffed and dipped her gaze. "Though I must admit, the Romany do have a gift for creative curses."

"I was not twisted by Gypsies," said Xander, as the entry bells tinkled. "Or anyone other than my appointed parents, teachers, and peers--and maybe one or two clowns."

It was terrible, and terribly sad at the same time. Anya gave him a sympathetic look. "Xander. You were only seven. How could you resist?"

"Resist who?" said Tara, walking in and looking back and forth between them.

"Xander's soft little mind was warped by carny folk, and now he thinks vomiting on dogs is fun."

"Oh," said Tara, blinking first at her, then thoughtfully at the floor tiles, then going to sit down.

"Who wants car-ni-vallll," said Xander, sliding the flyer across the table to Tara. A sing-song of excitement was back in his voice, as if their conversation had been wiped from his mind. Anya sighed and tried to stop worrying. He was impressionable, yes, but perhaps he retained only a few bright memories of his carny-tainted childhood, like a magpie recalling its shiniest trinkets. After all, if he couldn't remember a simple conversation for five seconds at a time, or her policy on flyers, or her fondness for oral sex (receiving, not giving--he always got it backwards), then could the wily carnies have made that much of an impact?
"Carnival?" said Buffy, wiping strands of sticky hair back off her forehead as she approached the table. She sounded unenthused, and Anya sensed they might have an affinity of dislike. This warmed her and gave her that satisfied feeling she associated with right thinking. She wanted to share a bonding moment, though not one involving hugs, because after all Buffy was perspiring and standing in the middle of the shop where customers might see her.

Xander handed over the flyer and started to say something, but Anya cut in, "It can only be trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" wondered Tara.

"Oh, any number of things," Anya said, waving a hand. "The carnies are probably demons who feed off the souls of children, while the fat lady is hungry for their flesh--or perhaps the tigers are shapeshifters who'll cut a bloody swathe through the populace. Of course," she said thoughtfully, steepling her fingers, "it could just be evil clowns."

"Evil clowns?" said Xander with a nervous laugh, looking around. "Come on."

"Oh," said Tara, picking up the theme, "The Tunnel of Love...it could be the Tunnel of Terror." She nodded knowingly, but also smiled a little, clearly not taking Anya seriously. Anya made ready to retort, just as Buffy said calmly,

"It's an evil carnival."

Xander and Tara looked at each other. "You sound...very sure," said her honey, sounding very dubious himself.

Buffy tossed the flyer back on the table and grabbed the ends of the towel hanging from her neck. "It's Sunnydale," she said grimly. "There's certain to be an unfunhouse of death, or an evil hypnotist, or freaks who'll--" She paused, at a momentary loss. "--be all freaky." She shook her head once in resignation. "We'll have to check it out."

"Great!" said Xander, rubbing his hands together. "One carnival of terror, coming up!" When everyone stared at him, he said, "What? Come on, lighten up. Pay heed to the law of irony." He held up one finger. "If it looks sinister, it's probably perfectly innocent. If it looks too good to be true, it must be evil."

"What exactly are you saying?" said Buffy, folding her arms and cocking her head.

With a cautious look, Xander said, "Okay, now I--"

"Yes," said Anya, "and by your logic, if you think the carnival is good, wouldn't it actually be evil?"

He gave this a second's thought. "Well, I--"

"What's your poofy bloke going on about now?" Spike asked with no uncertain boredom as he came to stand next to them.

Xander looked from Buffy to Anya to Spike, then shook his head as if to clear it. "Yeah," he said. "We're all going to die."

Vindicated, Anya smiled. "As long we understand that I was right all along."
Willow glanced back over her shoulder as she descended the cellar stairs, making sure that no one followed. The edition of Fenwhar she'd taken from the shop last week weighed heavily in her bag and she'd felt sure someone would notice its bulk, stop and question her. But she'd walked right to the cellar without capturing anyone's attention. Xander and Anya spared her no more than a distracted glance from their mild argument, and Buffy be-bopped in place with back turned and headphones on, shelving new stock. Tara's books had been on the table, but no Tara in sight.

She went straight to the bookcase and hid the book inside, setting it with care among the other things, then straightening up and shoving the shelves back into place. She cast a spell against its discovery and gave it a long, pensive stare, then turned to find Spike watching her with hands in pockets, head tilted with interest. It took everything in her not to jump and shriek like the sixteen year old she'd once been, back when he'd had the power to terrify her in ways intimate and permanent, to hurt her the way he could hurt Buffy now. At any time. At his whim.

"What are you doing here, Spike?" she said coldly, relieved to hear no trace of stammer in her voice. "Spying on me?"

He straightened his head, gazed at her in his unswerving, knowing way. "You're standing on my exit hatch, pet." He nodded at the trap door beneath her feet. And damn it, Willow couldn't tell what his calm covered for, if anything. If he'd seen, if he hadn't, what he knew, what he didn't.

"Don't call me that." She kept her voice curt, but felt savagery threatening her control. "I'm not your pet."

This earned her a look of artificial surprise, brows raised toward his sleek, blond hairline. And she could see him again as he would become, in a flash of vision: head lifting, shadowed by the brim of a dark cap, cigarette jutting from his lips as he surveyed demonic chaos and relished it. "On bad terms again, are we?" he asked. "Or's it your turn now to inflict the female curse on all mankind?"

"You're not mankind. You're not any kind of kind. And you're not a man."

Spike's eyes narrowed as he held hers for a moment, and then he looked down with a mask of self-restraint, rolling unspoken words on his tongue with a hard, ironic smile. He was impotent against her and he knew it. The flush of power Willow felt did nothing to take the edge off her rage. That power was only a bluff now, her secrets rendering her just as helpless. Driving Spike away again, maybe even killing him--she wouldn't flinch from these acts if she could be sure they wouldn't lead a chain of consequences to Buffy's death. Even in that last vision, against every evidence that Spike would revert to his true nature, Willow had seen him save Buffy from an otherwise fatal fall.

That didn't mean Willow couldn't hate the perverse son of a bitch, now that she knew what was to be. There was only big pain ahead for Buffy--for all of them. And Spike was at the center of it.

"Just stay out of my way," she said, and started to brush past him.

"Hold on, Red." Spike blocked her with care, holding up his hands and not touching her. Good thing, thought Willow, as she darkly contemplated loophole curses, unpleasant and unfatal. His nearness made her skin prickle. Up close like this, what was human in her reacted to everything unnatural in him. Even without Tara's particular gift, she could sense for a moment his aura, how its dead grey light clung to his skin, electrical but cold. How could Buffy stand it?
Spike's face had grown more serious, and a little frown of confusion knitted his brows. "Look, whatever I did, I'm--" He hesitated as if genuinely at a loss.

"You're what?" she challenged.

"Sure I had good reason to," he finished, in a weird parody of earnestness he probably believed. "Don't want to find myself on the frog-makin' end of your wand, though. If I've pissed you off, I'll fix it right."

You can't fix what you haven't done yet, Willow thought. And looking up at him, she almost wished she could forget. Return to comfortable animosity, unthinking distaste. This terrible fear and loathing wasn't entirely new--she'd felt it when she'd first found out about him and Buffy. It was only the truth she'd rediscovered, and it made her his worst enemy, and Buffy's best friend. She couldn't turn her back on the truth. On him.

"There's nothing to fix," Willow said, and she realized in that moment what she had to do. She forced her body to relax. "I was just cranky. You, you surprised me." And she gave him a small, disingenuous smile, hoping her eyes didn't glitter too darkly, that he'd overlook the racing pulse which was making her insides shudder.

"I surprise a lot of people," he said quietly, forcing his gaze on hers.

To that, she had nothing to say.

It was a balmy night with only a hint of autumn in the air, and everywhere on the block, windows had been raised to let the outside in--at least through screens. But anyone looking at the front windows of the Summers house would notice them shut. They were always shut, no matter how nice the weather.

It was that sort of house.

"...daring young man on the flying trapeze, and the lion-tamer and the lady on the pony," said Xander, to an avidly listening Dawn. "Though not the lady and the pony, because that would be a different kind of show. And then we'll hit the midway, and I'll find that guess-my-weight guy and outwit him with my weightiness. A lot has changed since Xander Harris was sixty-seven pounds. Plus," he said, leaning forward confidingly from the couch, "I've got a secret weapon."

"Doughnuts?" said Dawn, making an inquiring face.

"Extra sweater," said Xander. "And this." He dug a grey, metal ball his pocket, handed it over to her.

"Whoa," she said, as its weight made her hand drop. She hefted it a few times. "What is it?"

"Cannon shot. Civil War. Yep, I'm packin'. He won't be expecting that, my friend."

Faintly amused, Buffy looked away just as Willow came down the stairs, looking cute in her knitted pullover and jeans. Except the cute didn't quite reach her smileless face. Buffy felt her
concern rise a notch. She'd barely seen Will all week; it was like her friend was avoiding her.

"Hey, you," she said, walking over. "I'm glad you're coming tonight. It kinda feels like days since I've seen you."

"You saw me this morning," said Willow mildly.

"Oh, I know," said Buffy at once. "I know...I just mean, see you for more than two minutes over coffee." She smiled to take any sting out of the words.

Willow frowned, though. "Did you think I wouldn't come tonight? I'm always on call for a little recon, not to mention slayage. I'm not just spell, book, and candle girl, you know."

"Of course," said Buffy, nodding smartly to hide her discomfort. She felt like the big sister to the world and wished she'd never said anything. She sought a change of topic, reaching for the one closest to her thoughts lately. "So, speaking of books in the researchy way, I've been meaning to ask you--"

"Hey, was that the door?" said Willow. She went to answer it, but it was already opening and Spike was walking in, bringing in the lingering warmth of day from the darkness. Buffy stared at his outfit for a moment of paralyzed dismay, trying to take it in: faded jeans, a pale denim shirt buttoned up over his black tee, a bomber jacket. And hiking boots. If you squinted, ignoring the rebel hair and the age of his eyes, you could almost believe he'd just come from class, leaving a pile of textbooks out in the Jeep.

"What the hell are you wearing?" she blurted. "And who--where did you get those?"

"Goin' undercover, aren't we?" asked Spike, answering her appalled gaze with his most innocent expression. "Blend with the common folk, get the mark's-eye-view on your evil carnival."

Buffy looked to Willow for a sanity check, and Willow looked back with an expression devoid of humor or goodwill toward vamp. Ouch, thought Buffy. A defensive instinct she couldn't name and didn't like to think about kicked in, and she let her own judgment go. "Well, you'll blend all right," she said to Spike dryly. "Below the neck, at least."

"Maybe you can put a bag over his head," suggested Willow, walking between them to enter the living room.

Okayyyy, thought Buffy, raising her brows. What was that?

"Bit nippy in here," remarked Spike, gazing after her with darkened eyes that might have been wounded, or angry. Buffy hated to see those looks on him, at least when not directed her way as prelude to a kiss.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him into the dining room. "What did you do?" she asked in an accusing whisper.

Staring at her, he rolled his jaw as if working off a punch. "Yeah, right. Course. What did I do. Oh, right--bein' all demony. Just a guess, mind. Red's not exactly sharing."

Unhappily, Buffy sighed and added this to her pile of worries. One she'd have to get back to later, but not tonight, because--

"Hey," she said, trying to push him away, realizing Spike's loom had softened into a lean and a nuzzle. His hand had palmed her side, up along ribs and around the band of bra, and was now
stroking her back. And he was sniffing her, the side of her face, her hair. "Not here," she said, glancing toward the front of the house, certain that at any moment someone would walk around the corner.

He drew back and then kissed her hard, like an attack; even as raw as it got between them, she couldn't remember when he'd last been this brutal, demanding her with his tongue as if fucking her open. It terrified her. Without sense or breath she tried to climb his body, winding her arms around his neck. He drove his thigh between hers and jacked her against him. Gasping against his mouth, clawing his hair, she already felt herself approaching that exquisite peak, and then the front door opened and they broke apart at once, she smoothing her clothes in flustered anguish, he turning away and adjusting himself.

Buffy left him, carefully wiping her mouth as she rounded the corner to see Tara entering. She began squeakily, "Hi," then cleared her throat. "Hi, Tara."

Tara smiled and greeted her, and they wound up in the living room with the others, eventually joined by Spike, who looked faintly pained beneath his scowl and didn't take his eyes off Buffy.

God, thought Buffy, hiding desperation behind what she hoped was a convincing facade of cool, just five minutes upstairs was all she needed, her back shoved hard against the bedroom door and feet off the ground as he lunged inside....

Focus, she thought. And the ten-dollar word: sublimate.

"So why can't I go with you this time?" asked Dawn petulantly, and suddenly it was all too easy.

"You can go after we clear it," said Buffy.

"You're depriving me of the joys of childhood, you know." Dawn crossed her arms. "The, uh, scents and sounds of the midway, the candy apples and the guy who pounds the nail through his nose."

This from the late adolescent who refused to be called a child at any other time. Buffy turned a pointed look on Xander, who winced with appropriate guilt. "Hey," he said to Dawn, rubbing his knuckles on her arm. "If it gets a clean bill of health, we'll go back. Just you and me. Eat our weight in candy and beat up some clowns."

She remained sulky. "Sure, whatever," she said, rising for a grand exit. "I've got better things to do, anyway." Buffy made a stop sign with her hand and Dawn ground to a halt, glaring. "Yeah, I know the drill. Only by car, never by foot. Leave a message about where I'll be. Watch out for evil bloodsucking fiends." She turned, adopting a perkiness Buffy recognized to be a mockery of her own. "Bye, Spike!" Then huffed off and booked it up the stairs.

Spike looked after her almost admiringly. "Kid's turning out to be a right little bi--" He broke off as five heads swerved his way. "--it," he finished, his careful articulation making it a second syllable.

Four heads turned away, while Xander continued staring as if just seeing Spike for the first time. "What the hell are you wearing?"

"Okay," said Buffy a little sharply. "Fashion vampire? Not the night's most important topic at--"

"Wait a minute, is that my shirt?"

"No!" Spike darted a glance at Anya, quicker than a blink, then redirected a fine display of outrage at Xander. "Think I'd be caught undead in your loser castoffs?" he scoffed. "Once was enough. Still
recoverin' from the trauma."

Worlds collided, like chocolate into peanut butter, but more wrongly. Spike in Xander's shirt. Spike in Xander's shirt kissing her. "Ewww," said Buffy, before she could stop herself.

"Okay," said Xander, slewing a dangerous look her way. "What was that?"

"Nothing," she said, widening her eyes. "What?" She gathered herself. "Can we please focus on the real evil? Freaks, possessed tigers, homicidal fortune-tellers?"

"Maybe some of us are focused on the real evil," said Willow. But her tone was so light, so pleasant, that Buffy felt it tricking her ears. She couldn't have meant that like it sounded. At least, she'd emphasized no particular word, leaving Buffy to choose her own meaning.

"Right," said Buffy, not quite able to look at Spike. "So now we all need to focus."

Everything inside her was balling up together--her bratty sister, her sexual frustration, this disturbing new flavor of Willow--and she intended to take that tight, angsty ball and bowl it toward whatever demons got in her way. She looked around the room. "We get in, take stock, and get out. We don't draw attention to ourselves. Stay frosty," she told them, "and don't fight unless you have to. For all we know, this could be the darkness that the portents spoke of--"

Willow caught her eye quickly, then looked down.

"--so we can't get sucked in by appearances." Buffy paused to make sure she'd lassoed their attention. "Okay, then," she said grimly, "let's go pretend to have fun."

The night sky was a black canopy over the fairground, stars rendered invisible by the glittering lights of rides. The curves of the roller coaster echoed the line of darker hills in the distance, and the Ferris wheel rotated slowly, cars rocking as they descended. Faint screams--for once not those of victims--spiraled out across the grounds. Down the midway, crowds thronged, edging most thickly along the booths and shoving each other aside as they followed the scents of frying dough and popcorn and roasting meat. Everywhere children ran unsupervised, winding among and dodging the slower adults. Somewhere, a red balloon had slipped loose of a child's hand to float up over the tent tops.

"Oh my god," Buffy cried, jumping and pointing with one hand. Popcorn flung itself like chubby suicides from the box she held in the other. "Swings, they--they have swings! We have to go on the swings!"

Her excitement was not contagious. Xander picked popcorn off his shirt-front and looked across Buffy's head to Spike, who met his eyes and moved his face in a wordless shrug. And Xander tended to agree. It didn't seem like an evil spell, and yet--

"Cotton candy now," ordered Buffy, thrusting the popcorn at Xander, and taking the spun candy from Spike. The vampire relinquished the stickiness to her with no argument and then stared at his hand in distaste. He seemed to want something to wipe it on. Not my shirt, buddy, thought Xander.
He dropped back a few paces to walk next to Willow. "So, Happy Scary Buffy," he murmured. "Any thoughts on this development?"

"She's having fun," said Willow. She was absently kicking her heels into the dust as she walked, sort of like a kid playing toy-soldier. But on her it didn't look like childhood regression, not like the Buffy bounce going on up ahead. Xander tried not to watch that bounce too closely, in case Anya spotted him. "A slayer can always use some fun, right?"

"Did you notice she's also eating a lot more than the rest of us?" Xander dipped his head down, voice lowering. "I'm thinking, magicked treats? Maybe a little pixie dust in the popcorn? And in the ice cream, the peanuts, and the pretzels?"

"I don't think so," said Willow dismissively. "I checked them out."

"Oh."

He jerked slightly as Buffy squealed and grabbed Spike's arm, using the hand she'd wrapped around her cotton candy. Spike didn't look to the booth she was pointing, gazing down at the sugary sleeve of his jacket instead. It was some small consolation to Xander that Spike was as yet too bemused to take advantage of her perky girlishness. He stared at the vamp's three-quarter profile, and the clothes that were more human than he deserved. Of course...leather was dead cow, so that was kinda fitting, but not black, so strike one. Jeans, also not black. Strike two. And that was his shirt, damn it. Strike three, and Anya needed a talking to. The Xander Harris fall collection wasn't up for donation to some vampire charity.

Buffy hopped to avoid a kid, bumping Spike hard to one side. Spike made a patient face as he righted himself, then one of puzzlement as he looked down, patted his jacket pocket, and drew something out he clearly hadn't put there. He held the item away from his body, staring at it for a long, dire moment, and was looking around for a place to pitch it when Buffy said,

"No, don't throw away the corndog! I may want another bite." She took it from his hand and nibbled, as Spike watched with growing fascination.

Xander shook his head at the sight, and dropped back another few paces. "So, ladies." He let himself fall into step between Tara and Anya, an arm around each of them. "Who needs a manly escort through the Tunnel of Love. Oh wait, I think it's this little demon." He let his arm drop gracefully from Tara and squeezed Anya closer.

Anya wrapped her own arm around him and smiled happily, saying to Tara, "I let him call me that. He means it to be endearing."

Tara smiled, glanced up at Willow, and eased ahead of them. After a moment, they had their arms around each other. It looked normal, or almost normal. Xander couldn't quite tell. They sometimes seemed to be fighting, and then he'd find out they weren't, or he'd think they were all good and then they'd suddenly start fighting. It must be hard, he thought, to be in a relationship like that.

"Stop watching their backsides, honey," said Anya.

"I wasn't--" Xander broke off, twitching. So, okay, he had been. But he hadn't been thinking about it. He sighed. "Your jealousy is sometimes very charming and I love you deeply," he said in measured tones. "But I've told you before. When it comes to my friends, Xander Harris does not ogle. Put something in line of sight," he gestured with his hand, as if snapping a surveyor line from himself to the skirts, "then sure, it's gonna get looked at, and maybe cause some random neural responses in the man-brain to fire. But it means nothing."
"And maybe if I were actually twenty-three years old, I might believe that." She patted his chest. "Don't try to hoodwink an ex-demon, sweetie."

Xander nodded, gave a resigned smile, and reminded himself that her jealousy was sometimes very charming and he loved her deeply.
"Oh, I was just fooling around," she said, sweeping his words away with a hard edge; that edge a door closing on interior shadows, leaving him in the sunny oblivion of her face. "They're grown-ups. They can take it."

That edge, Spike realized with a moment's unexpected insight, was directed not at him but at her friends. And yet, the sun of her face still left him dust.

He was her fool. And maybe he couldn't take it.

Drawing her arms down from his neck, he walked on, she following at his side. "You know," he said with strained calm, "Maybe we aren't dating, but I remember every date I've had with you."

He recited matter of factly: "Fourteenth November, last year of the millennium, first time I knew I wanted you. Thirteenth February, ought one: knew I loved you like a sickness, knew you'd play merry hell with my affections."

More softly, he realized aloud: "Two years to the day since I saw you again, dragged back from the cold earth."

He paused, lost in thought, and she said nothing.

"Twentieth November," he went on, regathering himself. "First shag."

Seventeen months since I left you the first time, he thought. Nine months, twenty-one days since I left you the last.

"You must keep a diary," said Buffy.

He looked over at her face, which had grown reflective and yet still retained most of its sugar-high brightness. Words that might have moved her another time hadn't gone deep; he'd chosen the wrong moment, as usual. "I keep it all in here," he touched his head, "'long with everything else muckin' up my existence."

She stopped, and he stopped, and the river of people flowed around them on either side. "I thought you kept it here," she said, touching her palm to his chest. She spoke with meaning, but with a certain detachment, too.

"That clock doesn't keep time any more," he said, and felt a right Shakespearean prat, while she gazed up at him as if she'd run to the end of her lines.

Buffy finally looked down, then away. He studied her profile, the arc of her ear, the golden strands caught behind it, wondering how to love her and win her love back, when all attempts to date had failed so spectacularly. He'd beaten on her, let her beat him; left, come back; dragged her down when she wanted to be down, lifted her up when she needed to fly. He'd shagged her dirty and cleaned her wounds, played the fool for her friends, fought by her side and saved her bloody life. If his courtship had gained no ground after all this time, there was nothing left to do, really, but--

"Win me a teddy bear," she said.

Spike blinked. "Pardon?"

"It's what normal guys do." And with that offhand kindness she tugged him gently toward a booth where a sodding rainbow of teddies hung from the walls, a plush acid trip just waiting to happen.

The heavy, red-faced man inside the booth smiled as Spike handed over his money, then lifted the gun and aimed it. What do y'know, he had his bloody ducks all lined up in a row for once. He fired, and the duckies went down like coeds round a clock tower. The poor bastard next to him put his gun down in failure and sulked off with his disappointed girl, her loud claims that the game was rigged proven false.

"Normal," Spike said, lips curving faintly and eyes gleaming as the nice fellow pulled down the
teddy Buffy pointed to. "Yeah. Can do."

"I don't understand," said Tara. "Where is this coming from?" She was twirling the hems of her scarf between her fingers, and focusing a sidelong intensity on Willow's face. Willow didn't want to look back.

"I told you, I've just got a bad feeling about this prophecy."

"And so I'm supposed to run away?" A suggestion of anger colored Tara's voice, and she was bumping into people as they wove through the crowd, without seeming to notice. "This is my home, Willow. I am not leaving."

Willow glanced at her lover's flashing eyes, wishing she could say more. Words trembled on her tongue, and she swallowed them. "It was only a thought."

"Unthink it," said Tara firmly.

But Willow couldn't do that, she could only remain silent and pretend as she nodded. And still she felt she could win Tara around, if she kept arguing, if she pressed hard enough. She pressed her lips together instead, like she'd used to do in high school when feeling tempted to correct the teachers too often. And yet, with the frustration was a sneaky, selfish edge of relief. She didn't want Tara to leave her.

Tara took her hand. "I know you worry," she said, growing kind and gentle again. "But don't. I'm on the team, and I'm not going anywhere." She squeezed Willow's hand, smiled crookedly when Willow looked over, and seemed determined to cheer them both up. She was glancing up and down along the tents they passed, whose garish signs advertised the shows inside, supplemented by the barkers who trolled loudly for visitors, sometimes plucking them right off the beaten track and through the tent flaps.

"I thought they'd outlawed this sort of thing," Tara said, as they paused together in front of a signboard painted with the image of a monstrously fat woman with rouged cheeks and china-doll eyes. "Exploitation or something."

"Well, this isn't exactly Ringling Brothers. If it's an evil carnival, chances are it's illegal too," said Willow dryly.

Tara twisted out a grin, her good humor almost totally restored. Willow could feel a tingly flow of energy through their clasped palms. "Do you really think Buffy's right about that? It seems," Tara hesitated and then shrugged, "pretty fun. In a politically incorrect sort of way." And there was that cheeky earnestness Willow loved, hiding a glint of ironical humor.

They walked on, staring at more signs: a picture of Siamese twins, two sisters conjoined at the waist and shoulders and standing closely entwined with their arms around each other; another of a wolf-boy that reminded Willow too strongly of Oz.

And apparently Tara too. "You don't think it's a, a werewolf?" she asked, slanting her eyes at Willow with discomfort.
"Hey," whispered Willow. "Look." She drew Tara slightly to the side of the striped tent. In the dark, grassy aisle between it and its neighbor stood two figures watching them. It was hard to tell, but they looked like boy and girl, young enough to still be in school. Both had the hirsute faces and hands of werewolves caught mid-change, but they were growing no more wolfy. "I don't think they're werewolves," said Willow, voicing her experience. "I think maybe they were just...born shaggy?"

"Poor kids," said Tara, sympathetic.

The poor kids were whispering and pointing back at them, noticed Willow with a small frown. It made her vaguely uneasy, and she moved off with Tara.

"Hey," said Tara brightly, gesturing across to the opposite line of tents with a light swing of their arms. "A fortune-teller. We should go in, test her mojo." The sign-board simply said 'Madame Martiya.'

Willow dug in her heels, but didn't release Tara's hand. "I don't know," she said, looking at the dark purple tent. No barker stood out front, and its flaps were closed. The carnival-goers were giving its entrance a wide berth as if by some instinct. "Looks like she's on a break," said Willow. In the distance, screams trailed out into the night as the roller coaster twisted its riders upside down and flung them down into a plunge.

"Let's find out." And Tara pulled her toward the tent's entrance.

Darkness enclosed them as they entered and peered around, but as Willow's eyes adjusted she could see a low, frosted glow floating in the shadows ahead.

No. Not floating. The globe rested on a table-top, covered with a dark cloth, and behind it sat a woman with a large, timeless face, age and origin indeterminate. Gypsy. Or something else. The woman's eyes were closed, her hands resting flat on the table on either side of her...well, crystal ball. All the gaudy trappings of showbiz, thought Willow. She even had on a turban. And yet the stale air inside the tent reverberated with unmistakable power, and when Willow sought Tara's eyes, she could see her own nervousness reflected there.

"I think we should go," said Willow with more breath than voice. "She's, uh, resting."

"By the pricking of my thumbs," came a soft, throaty voice. The woman opened her eyes and stared at Willow. "Something wicked this way comes."

Willow felt a chill roll down her spine, even as a cracked laugh tried to rise in her throat.

"Open, locks," said the fortune-teller. "Whoever knocks." She stopped talking and considered them unblinkingly, first Willow, then Tara, then Willow again. She looked at them by moving her eyes, not her head, and those eyes were like circles of ice; irises so light a grey they were nearly white, but not with cataract. She lifted her hands to cup the air on either side of her crystal and waited.

"W-we want our fortunes told," said Tara, sounding less sure.

"No!" said Willow sharply, backing away a few steps, fingers locked with Tara's. There was too much power here, she realized, way too much. But her lover didn't move.

"Don't be afraid, girl," Madame Martiya crooned to Tara, eyes darkening from the inside out while the glow of the crystal intensified between gnarled hands. "For they unknot the binding of the gate, scale steps between to rise as on a wave, confound and swallow whole the sun above, terror bringing, flight driving to the caves." Tara gasped, grip tightening on Willow's. "And in the
darkness, one shall bear the light, which crowning cries the day again from night."

Shuddering, Willow dragged Tara free of the tent, shoving through the thick drapes around the entry. The air outside was cool, its darkness lighter, and even as the noise of the midway buzzed around them, it seemed more peaceful somehow than the heavy roil of whispers within. Arms encircling each other for comfort, they retraced their steps along the sideshows.

"Okay, that was...creepy," said Tara, sounding shaken. "What do you think it meant? I mean, do you think it has anything to do with the prophecy?"

"Maybe," Willow hedged, as her heart hammered in her chest with a whole new level of fear. She tried to process, she was trying, but too many thoughts shifted in her head. "I, I don't--"

"Ohhhhh mama!" The sudden shout made Willow flinch, and she and Tara were forced to stop short as a group of high-school boys stumbled from the fat lady's tent, some of them half-bent and wheezing with laughter. "Oh man," said one of the group, "Bitch was so fat I had to take three steps back to see all of her." The others howled and staggered, propping each other up.

Willow felt a stab of anger. They weren't exactly a bunch of lightweights themselves, not that it mattered, because even if they had been it was still wrong. Didn't matter that they'd paid to see a half-ton woman, they didn't have to be rude about it. She wondered if she had enough mojo to turn them into a group of elephants.

Okay, purely wistful thought.

"Can you imagine trying to nail that?" asked another of the halfwits. "Bet if you tried to climb her you'd burn your ass on the lightbulb."

"Oh, crap," moaned his friend, and dropped to the ground, gasping in delight and pounding a fist against the dirt. Another one was lumbering around, miming giant tits and belly.

The scene was beginning to get scarier. Willow exchanged a glance with Tara and they moved away, circling widely around the boys. They had to push through the curious onlookers for whom this was a better spectacle than anything inside the tents. At the edges of the crowd, Willow spotted the two wolf-children from earlier. One was licking an ice cream as he stared at the laughing boys. The other had her head tilted to one side and was scratching her hairy cheek lightly. They had the expressions of kids watching something mildly interesting on television. Behind them stood an unnaturally tall man, balancing a midget on his right shoulder, affording him a view. Their faces were expressionless, but Willow imagined a slight glint in their eyes.

"You know," said Willow uneasily, "I think I'm ready to find the others."

"Good idea," said Tara. As they distanced themselves from the sideshows, she leaned her head briefly against Willow's, then eked out a tiny smile. "I bet Xander and Anya have been through the Tunnel of Love ten times by now."

"Makin' with the smoochies," agreed Willow, forcing lightness into her voice but unable to lose her frown for more than a moment.

And Tara, head bent, had refound her own.
"There he is," said Xander.

"What, the same man?" asked Anya, delicately feeding popcorn into her mouth and studying the target.

"Well, just in the sense that he's everyman and he's about to get some payback." Xander rubbed his hands in anticipation and strode up to the machine.

"Guess your weight, son, step right up--hey, there, fella, c'mon up. That's right," said the barker, smoothly taking Xander's dollar and pocketing it away before Xander even realized it was gone. "Let's see, got some muscle on you, dontcha. Do a lot of working out, I'll bet."

Xander lowered his gaze modestly. "Well, I--"

"Yeah, a lot of working out," said the man, half-circling Xander and squinting closely at his body in a manner that could not in any way be mistaken for gay. Nosirree, thought Xander, squirming just a bit under the gazes of the passers-by as the man squeezed a bicep, then lifted the hem of his top sweater. "Thermal protection," said the man, touching the side of his long nose and winking. Xander gave a weak smile.

Anya was watching with interest, chewing popcorn. "Go get 'em, honey," she said, making an Arsenio fist and pumping it in the air. "Woof, woof, woof."

When had she ever watched Arsenio?

The long-nosed man took out a tape measure and began inspecting Xander's inseam.

"Hey!" Xander exclaimed, alarm increasing. "Stop that! Not kosher! I call foul!" He looked wildly around for a witness other than Anya. "Foul! Foul!" he called. He glanced at the man again, who'd lifted his left arm and was running the tape along its length. "Okay, this has gotta be a violation of the guess-your-weight-guy code. Do you have a union? I'm going to report your ass, buddy."

Long Nose said nothing, merely zipped his tape up and slipped it away. He switched his toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other, stepped back and tucked his thumbs in his front belt loops. "Two hundred pounds, son, not counting that five-pound ball you got in your pocket."

"Ha!" crowed Xander, jumping as far as a cannon ball in one's pocket allowed. "You are so mighty wrong, and I am taking that parrot home with me!" Turning as he spoke, he zinged a finger triumphantly at the small stuffed animal, so like the one he'd yearned for as a child, only to have his hopes cruelly dashed by the deadly accuracy of a weight-guessing man.

He stepped up on the scale, grinning, and then his grin faded. "Oh, no way." Astonished and horrified, he yanked the cannon shot from his pocket and dropped it with a dull thud onto the grass. His weight dropped five pounds, and still--

"No way!" Anxiously, he stripped off his sweaters, looked again, then bent and stripped off his shoes, hopping awkwardly around the limited surface of the scale.

"Xander." Anya was at his side now, tugging his sleeve and trying to get his attention. "Let's hop down and let the nice man weigh the other people, what do you say?" Nodding, she gave him a wide smile, but he ignored her and stared at the spinning needle until it stilled.

"No, no, no," he said, bewildered. "It's not possible. I weighed myself at home. A hundred and
eighty-five pounds--naked."

"Well, they say the camera adds ten pounds," Anya helpfully.

"Camera? What camera?" He stared around the weight stand with manic paranoia, then down at his rumpled shirt and jeans. "It's the clothes. Gotta be the clothes."

"While I very much like you naked," Anya noted, "I'd like to qualify that by saying: not here."

"Not the clothes, not the clothes," said Xander, then whirled on Long Nose. "It's rigged. Your scale is rigged!" He was astonished once again by human indecency. Was nothing sacred?

Long Nose frowned with displeasure. "Not hardly, son," he said. "Perhaps the lady would care to step up. I'll bet she knows her weight, don't you, miss?"

"One hundred and eleven pounds," said Anya contentedly. "But I'll allow for a three percent deviation, plus or minus."

Xander got off and she stepped on, after first handing over her popcorn. "One hundred and thirteen," she read, then frowned down at Xander rather sadly. "I told you not to eat that extra muffin. Perhaps you'll listen to me from now on. Hey," she said, brightening again, "Maybe this is that day you always talk about. You know, when you say, 'That'll be the day.'"

"I don't get it," he said, picking up his shoes and sweaters and ball. "The scale at home must be busted."

"It was fine this morning," chirped Anya, eating more buttery popcorn like a bird, a little bird. As he finished pulling on his sweater, she rubbed his arm with affection. "Besides, those few extra pounds only add to your sheer manliness. Eat all the muffins you want," she added in a generous tone.

"Thanks, sweetie." He shook his head, absorbed in the bemusing mystery of it all. "But man, it doesn't make sense."

"A lot of things don't make sense," said Anya philosophically as they walked away. "Like those boys over there," she observed, gesturing with her bag of popcorn. "Laughing themselves sick, but nothing in sight to elicit guffaws, not even a little tap-dancing monkey." They paused to look at the boys, alongside several other people. "I must admit," Anya went on thoughtfully, "they are kind of funny all by themselves...all tangled together like that. Like they're playing 'Twister'."

"Yeah," said Xander slowly. "Not that there's anything wrong with that...but...what's wrong with this picture?"

"Well, they are sort of...hysterical," said Anya, modulating to a disquieted toned that matched his. "And very," she twisted her head to one side, then the other, "tangled."

"Almost like they're, heh, growing together," he said nervously. "Into...one...enormous...guy."

They stared at the boys for a long moment, then at each other.

"I'm thinking now's a good time to find Buffy." Xander looked around at the crowd watching the writhing mass on the ground. Nearby, an under-dressed man inked top to bottom in tattoos held hands with a skeletal girl, both observing the show with dispassionate faces.

"Oh yeah," he said. "A real good time."
Buffy'd snuggled up to him after he won her the bear. Amazing thing: shoot off a gun, get your girl a critter, and she goes all soft and swoony. Had he known this? Spike wasn't sure. Things felt a bit fuzzy in his head. Buffy's perfume, maybe, slipping up the hatch, loosening things in his rafters, old dusty thoughts that flitted around wanting out.

Only a toy gun, only tin ducks. But even so, a manly shot. He'd remember that for a while, her twisty delight and her kiss, what'd made him want to grab her hot, sweet little bod and take her behind the booth and tickle her with his funny bone, but he hadn't, because...well, there'd been a damn good reason, he felt sure.

His thoughts meandered to match their pace along the booths. Her arm was so soft, he knew it to be, even though the weight of his jacket didn't let him feel it now the way he wanted to. She was so very soft, so very...

...Buffy, he thought mistily.

"Mmm, no more rides," she said. "That merry-go-round went too fast."

"Horses too wild for you, pet?" Spike smiled indulgently, and then blinked as she dipped down and brushed something off her shoe. It was enough to make a man goggle, all that lovely breast sliding forward in her shirt, which gaped to give him an intimate peep. He quickly looked away, feeling heat rise in his face. She straightened again and curled herself back to him, and he put his arm around her shoulders, trying to forget the sight of those girlish ti--bits, even though one was now pressed to his side, where his heart quivered in his chest.

Something wrong there, but he couldn't think what.

"They were big and wild," she said, craning her head to look up at him significantly from under thick lashes.


"You're all froggy," she said, and swung around in front of him so that they bumped together, and he tried politely to pull back but she was rubbing against him, slipping her hands in his jeans pockets. "Give me some money, I'll get us a drink."

"Sure," he said, dazed by where her fingers tickled. "Oh, yeah," he said with a stretching smile that contracted as she continued probing. "Oh," he said uncomfortably as his eyes glazed over. "Oh my...dear, yes." He gasped as she pulled out a wad of bills, then closed his eyes briefly and sighed with relief. Buffy turned on her heel, happily carrying off all his money. He watched her skip up to the concession stand, blindly cutting off a middle-aged couple in their approach. In line, she twirled her hips, stretched her arms over her head, jittered like she were powered by the steam of ten girls. Bemused, Spike raised one hand to his face to adjust...something that wasn't there. Caught by surprise at how his hand slipped on nothing, he blinked and frowned.

She brought back a soda with two straws, and for some reason he found this to be ridiculously endearing. He smiled down at her while she sipped, admiring her coltish grace and the captured sunlight of her hair, and then she shoved the drink toward him carelessly and his own straw went in
his eye and he gave a loud "Oww!" and knocked the soda away. She squeaked, and when he looked again, she was dripping. Spike was scandalized by what he'd done.

"Bloody hell--mean to say, damn--no, I--terribly sorry," he stammered, wanting helplessly to wipe her off but unable to bring himself to touch; little good it would do anyhow, as her shirt was so ruined and...clingy.

Spike averted his eyes at once. "You'd best get cleaned up," he said, looking across the nearby row of tents for facilities.

"Ohh," Buffy groaned dramatically. "I'm sticky all over."

"God," said Spike, shuddering all over and then taking a deep breath. "Right, then," and he glanced back just in time to see her pulling her shirt over her head. He looked quickly away again. "What are you doing?" he asked in shock.

"Relax, I've got on a sports bra," she said, and he heard the shrug in her voice. "Give me your shirt," she added, poking him hard in the ribs. "Since you got mine all wet."

"Oh, o-of course," he said, and kept his back to her as he removed his jacket in haste, trying chivalrously to shield her from view. He glared down a pair of boys who rubbernecked as they passed, and began shouldering off his outer shirt--unnecessarily, as she yanked it down herself without ceremony, hard enough to make him stagger. Freed, he held his jacket in front of him, twisting the leather and waiting for her to finish buttoning. Spike imagined he could almost hear the buttons sliding through the fabric. Funny, that.

And as he stood there, forbidding the view of strangers and thinking she must be finished, he suddenly felt her cheek rubbing between his shoulder blades, and then her lips. Spike froze. It seemed so familiar, but he couldn't make his errant thoughts and memories cohere; it was only this moment now, and a sense of bliss. He closed his eyes and felt a sudden shift in the world, almost as if he were someplace else, the accents of the crowd different, the natural laws of time and space renewed, and he didn't even know what it meant exactly, but he felt so young and so alive--

And then he opened his eyes, and the world righted itself. Almost.

Strong but delicate arms had looped around his waist, and clever fingers were playing with his belt. Spike turned so that Buffy's arms fell loose of him, but she didn't seem to mind. She trailed a finger down his chest, then took his jacket and put it on like she owned it. Course, she owned him, didn't she. Jacket came with the package. Spike took a shallow, quivering breath and felt at risk for happiness.

Leathered up, Buffy struck a pose, demanding that he admire her. And he did. Oh yes, he did. Spike's eyes flicked avidly down her pretty body, half dressed in his clothes. She wrang out her wet shirt with a grimace and snapped it once across his chest (ow, he thought), then tried to stuff it into one pocket of his jacket.

"What's this?" she said.

"What's what, love?" Spike asked distractedly, dragging his gaze from her breasts.

She held out something that caught the light and he took it from her with a flare of curiosity and a flash of recognition that eluded him a moment later. He turned the spectacles over, feeling the soft gold rims threatening to bend even under his most casual touch.

"I didn't know you wore glasses," she said.
"Not mine," he said, but then hesitantly opened them and slid the frame gently across the bridge of his nose. He blinked as the fuzzy world tightened up nicely. "Well," he said, mildly surprised, peering around. "Rather better, I must admit." Self-consciously he smoothed his hair back along one ear where the spectacles rested awkwardly. Poofy or not, another dab of hair gel might've been in order tonight. Felt like curls sprouting.

"Mm, geek chic," said Buffy. She picked up her teddy bear and nestled herself assertively into the crook of his arm, like a pup nosing up for a snog, and even as he thought that, Spike found it vaguely unseemly. He thought he might simply like to hold her hand, but she seemed determined to get as close as humanly possible to him without actually breaking through his rib cage to nest in his heart. He'd heard of a type of demon that did that, some kind of small, burrowing demon whose name he could not for the life of him recall. And Spike, roused from his thoughts, stared down at the pink teddy bear head bouncing off his chest, animated by Buffy's hand and voice ("Someone wants a kiss") and recoiled slightly.

"Er, right," he said. But no way in hell was he kissing the bear. In fact, he was wondering how he could lose it before it grew teeth and went for his throat, as all pink fuzzy things were wont to do sooner or later. He knew this from experience, 'cause...yeah, he'd been pink and fuzzy once. Back when...something. Spike raised one hand to shove his glasses more firmly onto his nose and tried to find the stray thought that kept eluding him. In my youth, he thought absently, I kept all my limbs very supple, by the use of this ointment--one shilling the box--allow me to sell you a couple. No, that wasn't it.

"Have we been drinking?" Spike wondered aloud, finding it odd the way his thoughts kept tilting somehow, sliding back and forth as if upon the decks of a ship on a storm-tossed sea.

"Soda," said Buffy. "Except it went spilly."

"Yes, so it did. But no, um--no alcohol, correct? Or...alcoholics?" As he spoke, Spike did a double-take at a woman in jeans and sweater who was cartwheeling by, chased by a middle-aged man and two children. "Absinthe, perhaps?" he murmured.

"Ab-what?"

"What?" echoed Spike, turning quickly to his companion and regretting his inattentiveness. How rude of him; he could have kicked himself. Briefly, he thought of kicking someone else as a kind of alternative concept, but the violence of the thought made him frown.

Buffy frowned back. "You okay, honey?"

"Do I seem," Spike paused a beat, "different to you?" He felt different, sort of fluttery, as if he'd drunk too much blood too fast, eaten too many kittens before bedtime. "Kittens," he said aloud, appalled at the vision filling his head. "Oh, dear Lord." He imagined his mother's face if she found out what he'd done. Whose kittens had he eaten, anyway--Cook's? She'd flay him. But memory scattered its pieces like a jigsaw puzzle and he scrabbled at the corners of his mind to assemble them, and the pieces were kittens and carriages, beautiful women and blood; dark blood everywhere, clouding his opera glasses and filling his mouth.

And, no, no--he didn't want those pieces of himself after all, seductive though they were, music in his memory and mind, sway of bodies, lanterns beckoning, clatter of hooves on cobblestones at night, and a woman's scream tugging at the very root of himself, like the most terrible, secret pleasure--
"Spike," said Buffy, pulling him to a stop and gazing up at him earnestly. "You're worrying me. You're all pale and sweaty and talking about kittens."

"Am I?" He choked out a laugh, feeling aghast and half monstrous, and trying to hide his alarm by not meeting her eyes. Over the top of her head he saw a chubby man pulling elaborate faces at passing kids, laughing uproariously and then crying hard, smearing his face with ice cream as he play-acted, and there was, if you looked closely, something rather wrong with his face, and how far the skin stretched under his tugging fingers--

"You're not listening to me." Buffy was pouting angrily, and Spike tried to concentrate on her again, because it was really quite rude of him, quite. She thumped his chest, then rubbed her hand there to soothe the assault. "You never listen to me. You're always smoking and staring off into space like you have such deep thoughts, but you only ever talk about sex, not about the things I want to talk about, like--like what color curtains I should redecorate my bedroom with." She finished heatedly on a note of challenge, and Spike realized a manly response was required.

He drew himself up, took her shoulders gently, and gazed down into her soulful eyes. "Curtains, of course, love. What color would you prefer?"

"This is bad," muttered Willow anxiously, "Bad, bad, very bad--"

"It'll be okay," Tara said, but Willow could hear the panic in her voice too. "It'll be okay," she repeated with force, as if she wanted to make herself believe this.

"I'm stuck on you." Willow felt dazed to foolishness. "But I never meant that literally." She bit her lips and winced as they lurched together, the tugging flesh of their arms keeping them close as they tried to retain distance everywhere else. If they weren't careful they might end up joined at the hip too, and again, metaphors without the meta: not so funny as you'd think.

"We're good," whispered Tara, darting glances around. "No one can tell. It looks like we're just holding hands."

And they were, thought Willow. Maybe for good. "You know, I wouldn't mind slayer instincts being wrong once in a while," she said, trying not to look at the strange people lurching by, like the sobbing guy who bobbed like a buoy on his unicycle and the girl with spectacular gills. "I'd be okay with that, really. I'd never hold it against Buffy." Don't babble, she thought. "Say your evil carnival turned out to be only a little naughty, or even good--a carnival of rampant morality--I'd be like, no sweat, we've still got vamps and demons."

"Galore," added Tara in a hollow, automatic way, pressing closer as a man on stilts (or maybe not stilts under his trousers, but long, horrible legs) stalked by. The muscles in Tara's hand tightened on Willow's, no skin between them. "Is that a real bear?" she whispered, stopping.

Willow stopped with her, then nudged her between two dark tents that would take them out of the bear-not-bear's path. They ducked in through the ropes and canvas and out again on the other side, and ran immediately into Xander and Anya.

"Oh, thank god," said Xander.
It was hard not to stare. Up. Because he was taller and broader and...oh dear. And Xander gazed down at Willow with a rueful twist to his twisted face, a tight little smile that said he knew what he looked like. "Quasimodo, at your service," he said.

"More like Fezzik," Willow offered sympathetically. "In that big, good way." He'd filled out his sweaters with bulky muscle, some of which had grown into a misshapen hunch on the left side of his body. His face looked like someone had thrust the heel of their hand over wet clay, smearing the skin, shoved cheek up and eye down.

Xander cracked a tiny laugh and held her eyes for a moment, the cord of their lifelong friendship thrumming between them, then asked gently, "You?"

She lifted her arm with Tara's and showed off their growing codependency, then made herself look away from his commiserating expression to Anya, who was tightly latched to Xander's arm in that inevitable way of hers.

"Nothing is happening to me," Anya informed them with a note of self-satisfaction.

Bully for you, thought Willow.

"We've seen it all over," put in Tara. "Everyone's changing."

"Getting super-freaky." Xander turned slightly and scanned the carnival-goers who still paraded up and down the midway. "We've seen it too." He looked back at Willow, and it was scary on some level, but warming, how he turned to her for direction. "What do you think this is?"

"I don't know. It doesn't feel very demonic, though. No attacks from outside."

"Yet." Xander's face was grim.

"Plus," she went on, gesturing at the still recognizably human people wandering by, "no one's turning into anything supernatural, and transmogrifying like this usually means someone's cast a spell."

"Like Ilwyn," said Tara.

"Or our old friend Ethan Rayne," added Xander. He shook his head once, as if brushing off the sting of memory. "We need to find Buffy."

Oh, of course, thought Willow with a feather tickle of resentment. Because the slayer was the panacea for all things, even witchiness that might, if you thought about it, be best countered by another witch. But this was a terrible train of thought, rickety and old as hell, and Willow made herself jump off. They had to find Buffy just because. It was the next logical step, that was all. And besides, worry was worming deeper with every passing moment: if this was happening to them, what was happening to Buffy?

"We stick together though, right?" said Tara anxiously. And Willow turned her head to stare at her along with everyone else. "I can't believe I just said that," her lover muttered in disgust.

They moved off as a group down the line of tents, took a turn and found themselves in a cul-de-sac that bordered on a line of trailers and caravans stretching into grassy darkness. Here and there among the makeshift homes a few dim lamps, rigged from poles, illuminated circles on the ground. Under the nearest one a red-and-white popcorn box lay, its contents spilled. Shapes, undefined outside the lights, moved at the edges of the trailers. Then one figure stepped under a lamp and squatted low to contemplate them. It was freckled all over, naked, possibly human, but there was
something wrong in how its limbs bent, in the way it smiled at them with white teeth.

Wordlessly, Xander took Willow's shoulder and eased her away with that protective clasp, and of course Tara; Anya kept in step with them all. Away from the cul-de-sac, the night air seemed to grow warmer again, and the familiar smells of the carnival overrode the faint whiffs of rotten produce and animal spoor that had seemed to emanate from the carny habitat.

Willow could feel the tense rictus of her face, and see that same tension among her friends. As she searched the throng she had to detach from their various expressions of panic and confusion. She couldn't pause to help them; right now, among all these people, only one person mattered.

"Buffy!" Xander suddenly called, his greater height giving him an advantage. He raised a hand and waved vigorously. "Buff!"

Out of the throng returned a shriek: "Xander! Xander!" Its sharpness made Willow's heart lurch, but then she spotted a golden head bobbing shoulder-high to the crowd as its owner jumped up and down, and the shoulders between them jerk as people were shoved aside, and when Buffy emerged to view, her face was shining with dippy joy. "Guys, hey!" She shoved forward like a speedboat parting waves, dragging along someone with glasses and honey-colored curls and a hardbody in a tight black tee and faded jeans, and when all of these elements coalesced into the recognition of Spike, Willow gawked shamelessly.

"Holy moly, mother of god," said Xander.

Spike blinked at them, staring Xander up and down as if unsure whether he was remembering him correctly, before zeroing in on the adhesiveness of Willow and Tara. A softness and sense of wonder captured his face, without cynicism and perhaps even without understanding. He looked younger by a century than when Willow had last seen him, and though he held himself upright in a familiar way—a vampire with good posture—a certain stiffness in the upper torso was new, as if his shoulders longed for the weight of a suit jacket.

"Where've you all been?" asked Buffy, twisting in place and suddenly falling to one side. It took a moment for Willow to comprehend that the maneuver had been deliberate; Buffy had not let go her firm grasp of Spike's hand, and swung from him like a five-year old before tipping herself upright and dancing to the other side of him. The vampire seemed accustomed and resigned to this treatment, like a stolid maypole, but a spooked look hung around the corners of his eyes.

"We've, uh..." Xander stopped as if unable to complete a reply, mouth hanging open. His gaze, like everyone else's, was fixed to the horrifying spectacle of Buffy rubbing a pink teddy-bear against Spike's stomach in a way you could call playful, if you defined "play" as "inappropriately suggestive gestures with plush animals."

Spike cleared his throat, and spoke in a voice so soft, so decorous and so polite Willow thought maybe her ears needed tuning. "Love, might I perhaps hold the bear for you now?"

"Snufflebear," crooned Buffy.

"Quite," said Spike, taking the creature between two fingers, clearly unwilling to repeat the name. He held it at his side, dangling by one ear, while Buffy wrapped herself around his other side, a ribbon against his ribs.

"Why are you wearing glasses?" Anya asked Spike with frank interest. "And what happened to your hair?"
"My hair?" Spike's eyes widened with immediate apprehension, and he raised one hand to his head-the hand with the bear--and felt around. "Is it in disarray?" His utterly courteous and not uncharming voice was beginning to mess with Willow's head, as was the way in which Buffy cuddled against the vampire, dreamily oblivious to her friends' changes.

"Buffy, are you, uh, feeling all right?" asked Xander.

"I feel great!" Buffy smiled at them, showing off lots of cheerful teeth. "We saw the flying trapeze people, and had pretzels and went on this spinning ride. Around and around."

Buffy gazed affectionately up at Spike, who at her cue collected himself to add an obligatory remark. "Oh, yes," he said to their audience, face open and disingenuous. "Around and around. For a period of several minutes. It was most...entertaining." Though he maintained his gracious tone, a pall edged his expression, as if he'd just returned from the front lines having experienced enormities no man or vamp should have to endure. Along with the teddy-bear, it was almost enough to stir pity in Willow. On the other hand, the fact that Buffy was wearing most of Spike's clothes soured any goodwill. The two of them had the self-control of rabbits, which was to say none.

Xander, grudging and incredulous, said, "Are you feeling okay, Spike?"

"I? Oh, I am quite well, thank you." He smiled genuinely, as if Xander were a kind friend for asking, and then the smile faded. "That is...well, to be honest, I am feeling rather disoriented. I appear to have wandered somewhat far afield of London, and things here are very strange." He glanced down briefly toward Buffy, who was pulling a strand of chewing gum from her mouth and examining it. Spike lowered his voice with an air of worried confession. "I don't believe I'm affianced to this young, er--Buffy, but my memories are quite dark and confusing." He paused, blue eyes behind glasses lowering in a reflective frown. "And seem to revolve around kittens."

"Oh boy," breathed Tara.

"Perhaps you kind people can help me?" asked Spike hopefully, looking with raised brows between the four of them.

"Well, that answers one question," said Willow. "As to the Buffy question--" She broke off and shrugged, using the wrong shoulder. Skin tugged at skin, muscle at muscle. Tara flinched and Willow gave her a stricken look. "Sorry," she murmured.

"Buffy what? Buffy what?" asked Buffy, waking up to the conversation with big, interested eyes. "What, what?" Exaggerated despair was entering her voice, as if they were keeping some fabulous secret from her.

"Buffy calm down," suggested Anya pointedly.

"I'm calm." Buffy pouted and rested her head against Spike's chest in parodic femininity.

"She's not grossly abnormal," said Xander in fascination. "Except in how she is."

"She's all hopped up on normal," Anya pronounced. When the rest of them looked her way, she expanded on her thought: "Well, look at her. All girlish fun and games, not a care in the world. If she were herself, she'd be vexed and searching for something to maim."

"Hey! I am myself." Buffy appealed to Spike with a flirt of eyelashes. "Aren't I, honey?"

"I think Anya's right," said Tara. "Whatever magic this is, it's operating on some principle of
reversal. All of us are pretty normal to start with and we're turning...um, freaky. But Spike's acting more human, and Buffy's acting--"

At her hesitation, Willow finished, "Like the 'before' shot of the slayer makeover." She spared a glance for Anya. "That doesn't explain Anya." But after all, what did? And then with unwanted, scathing memory she saw the other woman's face gripped in pain and terror as she was wheeled to the operating room, one hand cupping her distended stomach, the other outstretched toward Xander. Jarring, to feel pity and anguish resurge in stray moments like this. As if she didn't have enough to worry about.

"Yes," said Anya, envy and resentment suddenly surfacing. "Why am I not changing?"

"Maybe you're just that perfect balance of human and demon," Xander theorized.

"Oh," said Anya, eyes lightening. "My man," she said contentedly to the rest of them. "This is why I never became a lesbian, despite a millennium of loyal support for the sisterhood."

"I'm still the slayer," Buffy interjected belatedly but fiercely, then turned her head and spit her gum onto the ground. Spike looked pained. Gum spent, Buffy paused, frowned, then turned imploring green eyes on her friends. "What's a slayer?"

"Oh, boy," sighed Xander.

Music wafted through the night. A merry-go-round melody on calliope mingled with the accordion strains of an organ-grinder. Pipes and groans. Willow had heard this particular combination of tunes twice before now; they were walking in circles. They should have been near the edge of the carnival, able to pass freely into the fields beyond, but the games and rides seemed to loop back on each other recursively. Sometimes for a moment or two she would feel a cool breeze flicker over her skin, breaking through the heat of massed bodies, and she'd sense that they were close to an exit. But no exit materialized, no matter how hard they sought it, despite all the tricks she and Tara had pulled out of their mental spell-books. She was growing ill from the scent of fried meat and sizzling oil and spun sugar, and her right arm was welded completely to Tara's left.

She was terrified. And Buffy was dancing backwards to the music, in danger of tripping up Spike, who kept having to adjust his pace. Focus, Willow wanted to say to Buffy. But so far that command hadn't worked too well--it held about thirty seconds of juice before Buffy would revert to singing and giggling and trying to feel up Spike. Spike, an absolute gentleman when you put the right spell on him, had a gift for diverting her to less troublesome amusements, largely dependent on endless sums of cash drawn from his wallet. These fun sidetracks hampered their progress, and Spike kept apologizing to them with his deferential eyes. He hardly needed to; it was clear to everyone that a bored Buffy might simply flit off unstoppably into the night and disappear. Spike was the only thing keeping her leashed and close.

And how fucked up was that? thought Willow.

A zebra walked by gracefully, not looking at them. Not a real zebra, but two people in a zebra suit. Or possibly they were half-zebra by now, merging together under the striped cloth that hid them, in some ungodly synthesis. Willow shuddered. Damn, she wanted a drink.
"We've passed that same ticket booth three times," said Xander irritably. His words were getting hard
to understand, issuing as a raspy slur from the skew of his mouth. Every time he spoke, Willow
grew more heart-sick.

She stopped and Tara stumbled to a halt with her, and everyone else paused, Spike having to tug
Buffy back from a springy tangent off to the nearest concession stand. "Okay, I don't think we're
gonna be able to walk out of here," said Willow. "Whatever magicks they're using, they have this
place locked down."

"But I thought you needed your books?" asked Anya. "For a counter-spell?"

"That'd be my first choice," she said, swallowing down her irritation. "But since we can't--"

Yells broke out nearby, and they all jumped and whirled to see a cluster of people being herded
together by clowns. The clowns came in all shapes and sizes--balding and frizzy-haired, dumpy and
thin--but all wore violently striped trousers held up by suspenders. They were driving their prey
into a tight clutch and roping their hands together, and the struggling men and women might have
been mistaken for carnival folk themselves if their UC Sunnydale sweats and khakis and golf shirts
had not given them away as bizarrely mutated residents.

"Gahhh," said Xander in horror.

Tara turned her head as best she could to look at Willow. "We have to help them."

They surged forward together, along with Xander and Anya, kicking their way through the melee
to free the captured townsfolk. "Verere, recedo," cried Willow, and the nearest clown staggered
back, cringing. It always surprised her when these off-the-cuff spells did the trick. She invariably
forgot the rules of imperative conjugation in the heat of battle, yet her commands were somehow
effective.

"Ow," said Willow, as the clown hit her with a rubber chicken.

Beside her, Tara was chanting beneath her breath and zapping the painted-face creepies with small
firebolts, while Anya had grabbed a squeaky horn and was honking it loudly into whatever ears she
could find, startling them for Xander, who tossed clowns in an amazingly impressive way, face set
in a determined expression. When one went spinning into Spike, the vampire--human?--yelped at
the armful of satiny frills, smacked its face with the teddy-bear, then abruptly kneed its crotch. His
opponent doubled over, and Willow missed whatever happened next, but thought she heard sharp
cracking noises.

The misshapen townsfolk were scattering and most of the carnies had slunk away, except for the
one Xander stood on. He had his foot planted in the clown's chest and his captive wriggled like a
butterfly under a pin. Xander looked satisfied, and Willow relaxed slightly and searched around for
Buffy, finally locating her, gripping and peeping out from behind Spike's arm.

Spike himself was holding a clown nose and studying it with baffled curiosity. When he saw
Willow looking he guiltily dropped it on the turf next to a pair of giant shoes and the now mangled
bear.

"I fear I did some damage to the brightly dressed fellow," he said, nervously clearing his throat. He
raised his brows at her until they disappeared into his curls, astonishment striking him. "Didn't
know my own strength." Spike held one hand up and peered at it near-sighted, turning it back
and forth and flexing his fingers.
That gave her pause, and she glanced at Xander, who met her eyes intelligently. If the clowns were human, that was bad news, and the spell had more influence than they'd realized. Probably best not to raise the issue right now. Or at all. They'd be safe as long as Spike stayed...prissy.

"Upyago," said Xander thickly, removing his foot and pulling the clown to his feet. The guy, who in the chill of post-battle looked battered and very human under his grease-paint, dangled on his tip-toes from Xander's fist.

Willow closed in with Tara. "Okay, start talking," she said, anger firing her voice. "What's the big scheme, Mister Clown? What kind of creepy game are you running here, with your mutations and kidnappings and your," she floundered briefly, "your hurtful rubber chickens?"

The clown's sad face grew sadder at her interrogation, his downturned red mouth drooping. "Ahimé, lasciami, lasciami--ecco il progetto, eccola appunto, una burla innocente, io vi giuro, sentite. Ho torto, e mi pento! Perdono, perdono, lasciami!"

After a nonplussed pause all around, Spike said helpfully, "He appears to be Italian."

Willow gave him a bone-dry look, but asked, "You know what he's saying?"

"Oh," said Spike, face opening a little as if he were eager for the opportunity to assist, and then falling as he realized: "No. Not a clue. I'm afraid I don't speak It--"

"Great," said Willow, turning away.

"We should let him go," Buffy suggested. "And then follow him."

All heads turned her way. She was sucking on a round red lollipop that she'd found god knows where, rolling it inside her mouth--clack, clack, clack against teeth--and then popping it out with obscene smacking sounds. Spike, whose circulatory system shouldn't have been that active, had a ferocious pink blush and couldn't quite meet anyone's eyes.

"That's actually not a bad idea," said Tara.

"We don't have many choices." Willow sighed. "Let him go, and let's see--hey!" As soon as Xander had dropped his ruffle, the clown had shot between the nearest tents. Xander set off at once in pursuit, followed by Anya. Frustrated by her sack-race disability, Willow more or less dragged Tara along with her in a bumpy attempt to catch up. Sparing no look behind her, she could only trust and hope that Spike was lassoing Buffy along for the ride.

Their sneakers thumped across the ground, and Willow lost a moment by nearly tripping over a tent line. She tried to keep her eyes fixed on the green semaphore of Xander's sweater, flashing among the crowd. The hobble of her body with Tara's was distracting, though, and Tara was breathless as if she had a stitch in her side and then was suddenly laughing.

Willow gave her a quick, worried look.

"Don't you love farce?" Tara panted.
"Where'd they go?" Buffy said, disappointed, looking around for her friends. She sighed and stopped, and her boyfriend was forced to stop with her because they were holding hands and she hadn't let go. She was strong, she'd noticed. Spike blinked at her owlishly through his glasses, curls sticking up all over his head where she'd mussed them earlier. He was so pretty. Prettier than John Travolta in *Grease*, her favorite movie. He was a geek god. Greek, even. His shirt fit so tightly she could count his ribs and his muscles. They were big ones. The muscles.

Buffy wondered if the tent next to them was empty.

She bit her lower lip deliberately, and Spike gave back a small, charming smile as if he couldn't help himself. It was so cute. Even when the smile disappeared, it still lingered around the rest of his face. "Er, Buffy, we should keep moving--try to catch up with the others."

Polite too, not at all forceful, her fella. Not like some guys she'd known, like the big jerk who'd turned into a fish. Buffy liked the tone of gentle respect in Spike's voice; it meant she could have her way. Her way was the best way. Everything else was the highway. Or however that went.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Shall we what?" she replied, smiling, shimmying up to him and wrapping her arms around him. He made a squeaky, kittenish sound, absolutely precious.

"Find...your...friends," he forced out in small gasps as she cupped his ass. His eyes were doing that glassy thing she liked to watch. Buffy bet if she asked him his name right now, he'd have some trouble with it. Men were so easy, she thought, then something in his face changed as she rubbed his back pockets. He looked so lost, her Spike, so vulnerable and wanting and needy, but as his face shifted its expression, he also looked...more than pretty. Beautiful. As if someone had just wounded him. And she didn't know why that excited her, but she kissed him hungrily.

"Buffy," he breathed, between kisses. Her own mouth tasted like bubble gum; his tasted like fire. His cool hands were skating across her shoulders with gentlemanly restraint, but as their kiss deepened he gripped her with a power she hadn't expected. His strength made her moan.

"Oh," she said coyly, breaking away. Spike stared at her with awe and desire, lips parted, eyes wide. A good look on him, but...someone else was looking too. This bugged its way into Buffy's awareness. She turned her head and saw a vaguely familiar guy in a trenchcoat and fedora.

"Hey," she said. "I know you." The man, who had grey skin and beady eyes, started to move away, but she leapt and collared him. "You were watching me that night in the graveyard." She blinked. "I don't know what I was doing in a graveyard, but you were there. I recognize that hat. That's a funny hat, mister."

The man stared at her but said nothing, which irked Buffy. "So, 'fess up," she demanded. "Why are you watching me? Are you a stalker?" This possibility was flattering. "'Cause I know I'm uncommonly pretty, but that's no excuse for spying." She considered the issue, magnanimously decided to forgive him. "Okay, you've got a crush, no big. But I already have a boyfriend." She directed a look of affectionate pride at Spike. "He's very strong. He could kick your ass. Right, sweetie?"

"Pardon?" said Spike, startled from spectating. "Oh, oh yes. Quite." He'd been hanging back, but now he stepped forward one pace, puffed out his chest and gave Fedora Guy a withering scowl.

"See?" said Buffy, contented.
"I will take your leave then, Miss," whispered the grey man, eyes fixed strangely on hers. Buffy noticed he had oatmeal bumps scattered around his face, which made her sad.

"You know, medical technology can really help you with that skin condition," she offered. "And once you get dermatized, I bet the girls will be lining up for a date and you won't have to be all loser stalker guy." Delivered of her advice, she let him go, beaming. Buffy liked to be friendly to the less fortunate. It felt like her job, kind of. As the man walked away, she looked down on the ground. "Hey," she called, bending over. "You dropped your notebook."

The grey man turned and stared at her outstretched hand with disbelief. Impatiently she stood and held out the little book until he took it from her. "Thank you," he murmured, backing away a step, then another, before turning and disappearing into the crowd.

Buffy stared after him, frowning, then shrugged off her confusion.

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"Oh, thank god," muttered Willow.

Gaze following hers, Xander saw Spike and Buffy approaching, Buffy gaily swinging Spike's hand back and forth. Thank god was not his first thought, precisely, but he grunted once with gratitude to see Buffy turn up unharmed.

"Your extreme slowness cost us the clown," Anya scolded them. Buffy giggled at her, and Anya stiffened defensively. "What?"

"How do they stuff them all in those little cars?" Buffy wondered aloud. "And, hey, I've always wanted to know--how do they get ships into bottles? 'Cause that's, like, way cool."

Xander rolled his eyes Willow's way, wordlessly pleading, then heard Spike say in a kind and patient voice: "Not the ship in the glass, love--glass around the ship. Used to be, you could see it at carnivals just like this, glassblower with his pipe, spinnin' and moldin' the bottle, bunch a' kiddies gathered 'round. Let you put in anything you want, if you paid enough." A smile crossed his face. "Once, Dru had this girl's--" The vampire broke off, sucking in his breath and lifting his head, eyes going distant behind his glasses. It was almost painful to watch, and if Xander'd had any sympathy to spare, he might have...well, in all honesty he wouldn't have done anything.

"Come on," said Willow, into the uncomfortable moment. "He went toward the big top."

"Girl's what, girl's what?" Buffy was whining to Spike as they moved off.

Xander, who had zero interest in hearing the answer, tried to block them both out. His body had a funny ache, like it was growing bigger minute by minute. Probably was. Growing pains and growth spurts; he thought he'd left those behind in high school, along with his public rep for dorkdom and his very private sexual confusion. When a giant demon-snake culls your peer group, it almost solves as many problems as it creates. In an extreme way that would give you the willies for years, of course, leave you cold and sweaty at two in the morning, woken from yet another nightmare about snakes and anal penetration. But life was a trade-off--

And why am I thinking of this now, Xander wondered. They were nearing the big top, which was
the hugest tent he'd ever seen, easily fifty feet high, its canvas striped red and gold, strings of brilliant lights outlining its edges. It glowed against the night's dark backdrop, and from the open entrance spilled a raucous, colorful press of bodies, animal and human, forming a ragged line herded in place by carny folk. More people kept arriving, attaching themselves to the line's end.

This was definitely where the party was.

He exchanged a look with Willow and Tara. By silent agreement they circled the outskirts of the tent, away from the entrance. "Mussbee a wayin back 'ere," said Xander, the words stubbornly adhering to his tongue like a mouthful of peas he couldn't swallow or spit out. If we don't get out of this place soon, I'm gonna be Ur-guk, Neanderthal Boy, he thought in frustration.

On the other hand, the mighty strength thing wasn't bad at all, he decided as he lifted the edge of the tent to let his friends crawl inside. Watching Willow and Tara awkwardly coordinate themselves with through the gap angered him on their behalf, and his thirst for vengeance rose a notch. Demon ass was gonna be kicked tonight, oh yeah. Or maybe witch ass. Some kind of ass, definitely, he promised himself, watching Anya's wiggle through and giving it his distracted admiration.

He eased in after the others under the weight of canvas. Inside, they found themselves standing in a metal jungle behind a row of bleachers, among coils of rope and dropped sodas. Above them stirred a literally captive audience. Xander glanced up at the aluminum rows and shuffling feet as memories of high school resurged.

They edged their way through the structural poles and bars until they reached a gap in the seats. Between them and the ring stood a bald, heavily-muscled man with his back to them, thick arms folded across his chest. There was still a perfect view of the show, though.

In the center ring, a man in top-hat and tails--clearly the ringmaster of this particular circle of hell--was strutting slowly around a thin, mousey man whose cowing posture testified he'd rather be elsewhere. A girl with shapely legs, massive curls, and a pouf of sparkly fabric attached to her butt like a bunny tail, walked up and forced a handful of bowling pins into Mouseman's arms. The ringmaster clapped his gloved hands together once, then held them out broadly in a signal for silence. A hush fell over the crowd, restlessness turning to anticipation.

An ugly crowd, thought Xander, glancing sideways to find his gaze level with a small girl with a face like a cranky monkey's. She was bouncing in place, nearly throwing off her mother's hairy arm. "Cage cage cage," she cried, while her equally monkeyfied mother tried to shush her.

With growing dread, Xander returned his gaze to the ring, where Mouseman was juggling bowling pins. He started off okay, but grew visibly more nervous and clumsier as the ringmaster paced around him, cracking his whip on the ground. Pins began dropping and rolling, and Mouseman scuttled to collect them as the crowd's boos deepened. After a minute the ringmaster snapped his fingers and two big guys in old-fashioned wrestling suits came into the ring, grabbed the poor juggler, and dragged him off. Xander craned his head to track their progress and noticed for the first time a giant cage in the far ring. It was filled with people, some clutching the bars or sticking their arms through with entreaties he couldn't make out. Rejects, he realized, as the wrestlers shoved the man inside and relocked the door.

Yeah, okay. He pretty much got it now, and he saw by Willow's face that she did too. They were...recruiting. Everyone was being magicked into freaky carny treats, and the clowns had been a press gang, collecting likely prospects for auditions. But what would happen to the ones who didn't make the cut? Hell, what would happen to the ones who did?
He backed away from the edge of the ring, followed by the others. "The spell's making people into freaks and, well, jugglers." Willow said for the benefit of anyone who hadn't figured it out yet; like Buffy, who just looked blankly at her friend. "Probably worse--animals, even, and who knows what else. Once they get their makeover, the carnies drag them in here for a try-out, see who fits into their happy family."

"To find out what their amusement value is," added Anya, who caught on quick. Her expression was cynical. "They probably feed the lions with the unfortunates who aren't so funny."

No one touched that.

"Good Lord," said Spike. "How dreadful." And then he took off his glasses and polished them on a handkerchief taken from his jeans pocket. Xander stared and marveled. At the rate Spike was going, he'd be Giles by daybreak. An undead, blood-drinking, Buffy-shagging Giles, and oh dear god in heaven, they had to get out of here.

"We have to find the power center of the spell," Tara said. "Break its influence and take out whoever's controlling it."

"It's obviously the ringmaster." Anya glanced around. "Right? That's why they call him that. Ring Master." She flipped one hand back as if this was self-explanatory.

"Maybe," said Willow with a note of doubt. She and Tara traded a look.

"Wha?" said Xander impatiently. "Whaaa?"

"We, uh, came across a fortune teller earlier." Tara hesitated. "She was giving off some wicked strong energies."

"Yeah." Willow nodded, but looked reluctant for some reason. "We should probably check her out. I guess we'd--"

"Grab them," said a somehow burly voice, and Xander flinched as hands gripped his biceps. They'd been surrounded by big, big wrasslin' guys, the kind of guys you didn't want to meet in prison. And he would have put up more of a fight, hell yeah, but one of them had his beefy forearm wrapped casually around Anya's throat. Grimly, Xander let himself be shoved out of the bleachers with the others, biding his time. Buffy, getting in touch with her inner princess, was grumbling peevishly to the wrestlers about their rough handling, and Spike was uttering sharp heys of nervous outrage. This was their crack fighting team.

Go team.

The center ring was smack under the brilliant spotlights, tight-ropes and trapeze nets swinging above, a thousand faces swimming in the stands, watching their every move. It was enough to give a guy stage-fright, if the whips and--hey, look, kids: tigers--hadn't been so distracting. Xander clenched his fists and turned in place, clocking the loose circle of tough guys and tigers, trying to decide which was the bigger threat. Some of the tigers paced; others sprawled in orange dejected heaps on the ground, their faces drunken or dazed. One reminded Xander of Bill, a foreman at the company who always wore that same expression of disgruntlement, as if he'd just eaten a burrito that wasn't sitting well.

Xander tried to capture the big cat's eye, send him a mental salute: Don't worry, Bill. We'll get ya out of here, buddy.

The ringmaster strolled up, his tuxedo penguin-proper, buttoned across a barrel chest. Up close the
spaghetti stains on his white shirt-front became evident, and Xander could see that his top-hat held a few dents. He looked grandfatherly and human and bored.

"Well, well," he said in an accent Xander couldn't place. "Here's a motley crew." He began theatrically smoothing the waxed lengths of his mustache from roots to tips as he considered them. "Not a lot to choose from, is there now." He measured Xander from head to foot with a dismissive look, frowned discontentedly at Willow and Tara, then swept his gaze across the others.

"Hmm," he said, stepping up to Buffy. "What can you do, little lady?"

"What--what do you mean?"

"Can you ride a fancy pony, girl? Swing on the flying trapeze? Or," he said with a cruel smile, "maybe we can just toss knives at you, eh?"

Buffy lifted her chin defiantly. "I could do any of that, including the being tossed at part."

"Here," said Spike, affronted. "I won't have you tossing knives at her." The words themselves sounded almost normal coming from him, but his accent was still cultured, his voice melodious. The ringmaster turned his attention to Spike, looking unimpressed. "Really. And what will you do about it, m'boy?"

Spike blinked, discomfited. "I shall...I shall...lodge a protest." His conclusion was delivered with stiffly proper emphasis, and a jut of chin not unlike Buffy's own.

"Thanks, honey." Buffy smiled and rubbed Spike's arm affectionately.

Xander sighed.

"Useless," the ringmaster decided, echoing an opinion Xander had held for the last four years. He snapped his gloved fingers, and a wrestler came up behind Spike and pinned his arms back.

"Help," yelled Spike, alarmed, his gaze flying to Xander, who winced. Did he really have to save Spike? Well, no, in fact. Besides, the timing really wasn't quite right. But as Spike realized that no rescue would be forthcoming, an expression of starched outrage dawned and he dug in his heels. The wrestler staggered slightly, and Spike wrenched free, turned and slapped the man's cheek as if challenging him to a duel. "Vulgarian," he said with scorn. The crowd cheered wildly, obviously startling Spike, who looked around in sudden wonder toward the audience hidden beyond the glare of footlights. The wrestler tried to take advantage of his opponent's distraction and grabbed Spike's head in an armlock.

And as Spike twisted free like an eel and kicked the man's legs out from under him, Xander decided the timing was better, so he turned and started punching. Wrestlers began falling like a juggler's ninepins, laid flat by his good right fist, most of them out cold with a single blow. Damn, but he was strong, Xander realized afresh. A guy could get used to this. Indiana Jones, Rambo, Conan:

Xander Harris.

The thing about chaos is, it's hard to keep track of. He heard screams from the bleachers, and more cheers, and sharp snapping sounds and the roar of tigers; he spun, searching wildly, not wanting to meet a throatful of teeth, and met the ringmaster's whip-crack instead. A searing pain curled around his wrist and he was jerked off-balance, the whip snaking away before he could grab hold. It snapped him again across the cheek, barely missing his left eye, then wound itself around his
throat. Half-choking, he managed to seize the braid this time and with a hard pull, the ringmaster stumbled to his knees.

Yanking the whip from his neck, Xander tried to gauge what was happening and where to strike next. It was difficult to focus, but a fierce tiger-wrestler battle seemed to be waging, and among the melee scrambled clowns, intent on subduing his friends. When from several yards away he saw Buffy going down for the count under a pile of white satin, it was a mere moment's instinct to draw the cannon shot from his pocket.

And he winds up, and he pitches.

The ball hit its target in the back, and suddenly Xander could see Buffy again, standing upright in shock, staring down at the felled heap of clown. And damn it, she wasn't moving, and a tiger was loping toward her.

"Uffeeee!" he cried in warning, just as someone galloped by on a pale horse, arm swinging down to scoop her out of the beast's leaping path, and it was Spike. A blur of hooves, a girlish Buffyyish yelp, and Spike, galloping off into the sunset with his booty.

But I threw the ball, thought Xander, goggling at the unfairness of it. "Ih'm th' herro, not him," he ground out in a disgusted voice. Not Mister Pansy-Ass Victorian Vampire. "Damn't!"

Dander up, he whirled ferociously and punched what was nearest, which turned out to be the cushiony nose of a zebra suit. The zebra collapsed backwards onto its ass, two pairs of legs splayed.

"Soh'ree," exclaimed Xander in startlement, just before a body crashed him and he went toppling down.

"Oof," said Buffy, as she landed across the horse in an awkward position, a pommel in her gut, breasts mashed to the sleek hide. Her eyes went wide; there was a lot of crazy bouncing going on. Too much bouncing. "Ack," she gasped. "Can't...breathe."

The horse skidded to a halt, and Spike slid off and lifted her down. "Sorry," he said anxiously. "Are you all right?"

"Oh," she said, clutching her bruised tummy; then gazed up at his concerned face, eyes so blue and tender behind his round little glasses. "You saved my life!"

"I did, didn't I?" said Spike, looking surprised and then pleased. His head lifted and he scanned the scene of combat with rising interest. "Perhaps I could save even more, while delivering the smiting hand of justice to these ruffians!" And, eyes lit up with zeal, he dashed off into the fray, leaving her standing next to the horse.

"Hey!" Buffy put her hands on her hips. "Fine, just abandon me. Now what am I supposed to do if some big hulking creep comes along and--oh!" She looked up a long ways, into the leering face of a mostly naked guy with a big gold belt and satiny panties, though maybe guys didn't call them that. "My, you have symmetrical muscles," she simpered, hoping that he'd be like any man,
appeased by compliments. But he just grabbed her, and instinctively she struggled, slamming her foot onto his instep, then banging her knee up into his goolies. She squeaked as the man sank to his knees, nearly dragging her down with him as he slid the length of her body. Buffy punched him in the nose for pawing her.

"Wow," she said, examining her unhurt fist. "I bet with this, I don't even need a boyfriend." And cheerfully she looked around for someone else to hit.

The stampeding audience had flooded the ring, half of them fighting, half running blindly, the remaining half beelining for the exits. There was definitely one half too many, and Xander could barely see five feet in any direction for all the panicky people, even with his augmented height.

"Illo, Tarrahh!" he shouted, shoving aside careening escapees. "Anyyuhh!" One running body separated itself from the rest and clung to him. Anya. Relief filled Xander and he hugged his girl close until she squirmed free and pushed him away.

"We have to get out of here." Her voice was higher than usual, her brown eyes wide.

"Uh-uh," said Xander, shaking his head. "Illo. T'rah. Me Tarzan, you Jane, he thought as she blinked in incomprehension. Except he felt more like me-Cheetah. At this point, he might as well use sign language.

"Willow? Tara?" she said, puzzling it out. "We'll never find them in all this mess."

But as if cued, Willow and Tara suddenly staggered out of the chaos. Their clothes were slightly askew and Tara had a bleeding gash along one cheek. In a new development, a fleshy umbilical cord now connected their bodies just above their hips. Xander manfully tried not to stare, but it was way gross. And as he was staring and pretending otherwise, Spike charged up with a fistful of tuxedo, inside of which slumped the ringmaster, looking more battered than when they'd last seen him. Spike dashed the man to the ground, kicked him with elegant force, then hauled him up again.

Any other time, Xander would have been dismayed to see Spike inflicting damage on a fellow human, but he couldn't really fault the vampire under the circumstances. It was like watching a neutered housecat swipe at a rat, with a brainless and almost innocent pleasure.

Spike's eyes held a gleam, but his voice was still ultra-soft as he said: "Thought this gentleman might be persuaded to help us."

Buffy ran up bouncing with no more worry in her face than as if she were merely late for a party, as Willow asked the ringmaster, "Where's the power center for this spell?"

"And we know you speak English," Tara finished irately.

Xander grabbed the ringmaster away from Spike and breathed an unintelligible vow of revenge into his face. *Whipper-snapper*, he added in a way that required subtitles. The man flinched from him, waving his hands to affirm surrender, his face growing red above his tightening bow-tie. Come to think of it, maybe he was actually gesturing for air. Ha ha, thought Xander.
"Xander, let him talk," said Willow.

He dropped the man, who wheezed and coughed a moment, then touched his boutonniere with tenderness, as if fearing it had been damaged. "Madame...Martiya," he managed reluctantly, just as Xander was growing dangerously impatient.

"I knew it." Tara looked to Willow, urgency in her expression. "We've got to get to her before she intervenes any further."

And so they had a name and a plan, thought Xander. Go team, he thought with more optimism.

They moved carefully through the carnival in a tight knot, almost as one body.

An unfortunate description. Following Willow-and-Tara's unified lead, Xander decided that his masculine instincts were finally being proved right: too much intimacy was a bad, bad thing.

"'Ey, hold'p," he said, as his eye was caught. The others stopped and waited in silent confusion while he stepped up to the high-striker. "Alwaysh wanted t'do thissh." He grabbed the hammer leaning against the game, swung it back, and smashed it down with all his might. The weight flew up the length of the machine and sharply struck the bell, which went flying off the top, a red arc across the night sky.

Xander laughed in awe of himself.

Perfect.

"This is it," said Willow, looking back over her shoulders at the others before stepping inside the tent, careful for Tara's sake not to walk too fast. Inside the tent, nothing essential had changed: the table with its dark cloth falling in precise pleats, the globe luminously centering the table, and the ageless woman cupping the source of her magic. Her eyes were not closed this time, though. She waited for them.

"You have returned for your fortunes?" The woman gazed at Willow unblinkingly as the others fanned out along the inside of the tent. "Whose shall I tell first, hmm?" A smile seemed to hover at her lips, unborn. "Perhaps yours, child. For darkness rises by thy silence kept, secreted and in cunning craft allied--"

"No!" Fear shot up Willow's spine like the weight on the high-striker.

The fortune-teller broke off at her cry, with a knowing look. "You will not accept your fortune?"

"No," repeated Willow, shaken but gathering herself together for an assault. "We're here to tell you
yours, old woman." Darkness lowered her voice to a threatening pitch, and she reached for what spells were handy to mind, ready to set her will against that of the fortune-teller. Tara's energies were a sympathetic mirror, mingling and resonating with hers as they never had before, not even in lovemaking, coursing through their joined bodies and making them--her--stronger, her darkness lighter. She deafened herself to the whispers of her friends, let Tara's soft chants and heartbeat steady her; she blinded herself to everything but the woman's long face, a mask of flesh hung in shadows.

They'd grown together like a gnarled tree, she and Tara, and together they lifted their welded arms and their free arms to form a trident striking. They would have immobilized their prey, but even as they lashed out with their powers, the woman's face crumpled and dissipated, the velvet of her robes falling disembodied to the chair, her turban rolling to land at Spike's feet like a fat purple beehive. He picked it up warily, shook it as if something might fall out, then peered inside. His puzzled shrug to them indicated it was empty of any residual fortune-teller.

Bemused, Willow gazed at the table, on which the orb still glowed. She hesitated, then reached for it--

--as the tent changed, breathing around them like a huge mouth, growing bigger but pressing closer at the same time, the air heating, becoming heavy and fetid. It happened almost too fast to take in--as the others began to hunch and glance around, skeletal fangs ripped through the ceiling and floor, piercing the drapes and closing willfully on the tent's inhabitants.

And as Willow tried to process what was happening, the floor rolled like a huge tongue, spilling them all to the ground and rolling them toward the teeth. Anya was shrieking and Xander yelling incoherently, and then Spike roared in pain as his upper arm was caught between two teeth and held between their grinding force. He punched savagely at the upper fang, unable to get a good angle with his free arm and nearly sobbing, as Xander took advantage of another swell of floor, body-surfing Spike's way. He landed in a heap next to the vampire and added his strength to the job, fist smashing against demonic bone, which began to break into shards.

Then the table fell over on its side, blocking Willow's view. "The orb!" she yelled, as the table rolled back and forth on its edge, somehow not quite tipping onto its surface.

The tent seemed to be growing angrier, and sound buffeted them now too, the roar of a storm at sea. Trying to retain presence of mind, Willow crawled as best she could in tandem with Tara, gaze darting around in search of the orb. When Willow briefly looked up she glimpsed Buffy kicking teeth, just before a shuddering movement, disturbingly like a swallow, landed the slayer flat on her back. Buffy turned her head to stare across the floor at Willow like a dazed cheerleader who finds herself toppled from a squad pyramid, then bounded up again, her attention diverted by a cry from Anya.

Willow and Tara both saw it at nearly the same time. "There," cried Tara. The orb was caught in a declivity of floor, a pearl shining against dark velvet, teasingly just out of reach. Just as Willow was about to coordinate a lunge, the floor heaved and the orb rolled right to them, coming to rest like a bunted baseball in her outstretched hand.

Willow blinked in surprise, then tugged at Tara. "Come on," she said. "Hurry." The two of them wormed their way toward the nearest row of teeth.

"Molars," gasped Tara.

Which lay further back, beyond Spike--now free--and Xander, who in a duet of violence were delivering a punishing hail of blows to the tent-mouth. The results resembled broken stalactites and
\textbf{stalagmites.}

"Xander," yelled Willow, and he turned at once, gaze searching wildly before dropping to locate her on the ground. She held out the orb. "Between the teeth--destroy it!"

He jumped their way, grabbed the orb, and then fell, skidding clumsily across the floor but in the right direction. It was a moment's excruciating wait for the back teeth to widen enough, then Xander slammed the orb down, yanked his hand back, and one sickening crunch did the trick, accompanied by a scream of unearthly pain and exploding dentin.

But hey, thought Willow a minute later, brushing bone chips from her hair with her two good hands,

"Guess you can't expect a quiet surrender on the Hell...mouth." And she caught Tara's ironical eye and groaned kittenishly at herself, feeling like a vamp forced to hear one last bad slayer pun before the dust settled.

Another day's clock had spun its hands, and a fresh night had settled across Sunnydale, a black sheet across its houses, graveyards, grassy lawns. It was raining--whimsical and Californian; an effervescent spritzer of a rain. At the Summers house, though, the windows were still buttoned up tight against weather and weirdness.

Inside, it was Scooby Central: the television was flashing scenes from \textit{The Stranger} but no one was watching; the popcorn bowl was passing from hand to hand; bodies were shifting with restless discomfort and residual unease. Xander sat on the couch, thigh to thigh with Anya, who cuddled with an expression of contentment no one else wore. Tara sat next to them, her hands clasped together, while Willow perched on the couch's arm; it was obvious at a glance that each woman was carefully not touching the other, though the space between them didn't look fraught with tension. Across from their friends, Buffy and Dawn commanded chairs, and behind Buffy's, Spike leaned against a bookshelf broodingly, wearing his duster with a somehow aggressive panache, over clothes completely black.

"So it was just gone?" asked Xander. "The whole shebang?"

"Pulled up stakes," Buffy confirmed, then pulled a frowny face as if realizing what she'd said. "So to speak. Shebang and all."

"Just an empty field," put in Willow, playing with her handful of popcorn. "With the tent-holes and the mud."

Tara glanced sidelong at her lover. "And rather a lot of elephant dung."

"Bloody good riddance," came a sulky snarl from Spike.

Xander's gaze sharpened and a dryness tugged at his lips. "I don't know, \textit{William}. Some of the night's entertainment was funny ha-ha."

"Says Andre the Giant Wanker." Spike shoved off his bookshelf and stood, hands in pockets,
scowling at Xander from the middle of the room.
"Four-eyes."
"Piltdown poof."
"Mama's boy."
"Guys--"
"Same again to you."
"Ha. I don't like my mother."
"Guys!"
"Funny that, you get more like your mum every day."
"Well, you--"
"Shut up, both of you!" Xander and Spike broke off and looked at Buffy, bemused. "I've got a stake for each of you." She glared at them in turn.
"Is mine the A-1 kind?" asked Xander plaintively.
"Yours is the pointy kind." And Buffy drove her point home with a pointed look, while Tara snuck out a grin.
"Hey." He waved a hand in reminder. "Good guy here."
"The only distinction to me right now is that you'll leave a messy corpse."

Spike's smirk upped itself a notch.
"Hero for a day," said Xander, leaning forward with a head-shake and draping his arms over his knees. "I knew it was too good to last."
"You were wonderful, honey." Anya patted his arm. "Very rugged."
"In a grunting, Neanderthal way," said Spike, switching gears to add archly: "Very rugged, peaches."

Xander bristled again. "Mocks he who was so very not!" He paused. "Rugged."

"Hey!" Buffy swung her irky glare between them again, distractedly noticed Willow getting up from the couch and walking toward the kitchen. "Behave."

"We have water pistols," offered Dawn. "They could have a show-down at thirty paces. With jello...before it gets all wriggly, I mean. Hey, that would give new meaning to 'jello shots'." She heh-hehhed at her own wit, then sulked a bit when no one else did.

Sighing, Buffy left her friends nattering and wrangling in their familiar way and headed into the kitchen, where Willow leaned on the counter, an unopened beer propped in front of her. She was staring at the bottle as if it were a face-off, as if she were communing with the spirit of the hops.

"The St. Pauli Girl is laughing at me," said Willow morosely.
Buffy came over to the counter, let her hip rest against it. "Well," she said stoutly, "I never liked the bitch. Girl's a ho if ever I saw one. Here. Give that over. I'll scratch her eyes out with my--oh, damn, I broke a nail." She frowned at the pink tip, sad and ragged.

"Your angst trumps mine." Willow's voice was ironical and not unfriendly, but somewhat dull too.

"Well, no." Nails were important, though. Because her mom used to say, people always look at your hands, honey; they say a lot about who you are. And she didn't want her hands to say, 'Hi, I'm a ragged-ass slayer who does a lot of violent staking with these digits and by the way, I've forgotten how to groom myself.' But these thoughts scampered through Buffy's head as fast as mice and out again, as she went on nervously, "Are you having beer angst? 'Cause you say the word and I'll toss that St. Pauli chick out on her...glass. Her and all her friends."

Willow looked up and smiled faintly. "That's okay." She paused and straightened, pushing the bottle away; Buffy found her friend's eyes strangely opaque. "How are you doing? Now that Spike is back to abnormal?" Now that you are, she didn't say. And she would never have said that, not Willow, but Buffy thought it. Back to abnormal, back to little red slayerhood.

"I'm dealing," Buffy said, sliding her glance away, looking around her kitchen. The ceiling light bounced off the windows, made shiny the floor. It was like how light bounced off eyeglasses. Too bright. Distracting. And sometimes you couldn't look at someone's eyes. "If I hadn't been all retro-Buffy it might have been stranger. He did seem very human and guylike, didn't he?" She tried not to be wistful. Wist was pointless.

"In his way," agreed Willow.

"He felt so safe." Buffy gazed at the floor tiles, memory sweeping her back despite her best intentions. "He's never felt safe before. Never even been near the state line of safe." She sighed, shook off her nodding. "Some of it I don't even remember that well." It was true; gross amounts of spun sugar and fried dough would have pretty much addled her brain even if the spell hadn't, but something was snagging at her mind now, a useful distraction that she fixed on immediately. "At the end, when we were in the tent with Madame--" She hesitated. "Martina Navritalova whatever--she started to tell a fortune. It sounded like--"

"Nonsense," said Willow flatly.

"Oh." It was like hitting a stone wall. Buffy went over walls, the real kind. Friend walls were more challenging. "I thought maybe it had something to do with the prophecy. 'Darkness rises.' Wasn't that it? Those were the only words I can remember."

Willow, not looking at her, pulled out a counter drawer and found a bottle-cap opener. "Yeah, I think it was something like that. But, you know, darkness always rising 'round Sunnydale, yadda yadda.

She was ready to listen to Willow, as she always did, listen and shrug it off. But she was the slayer and she made connections, sometimes without even trying. Her mind chased things down, nailed them in place. "You said she had a lot of mojo, though, right?" She tried to respect her friend's opinion while heeding her own nagging instincts. "It's not as if she was a fruitcake, unless a very powerful fruitcake." She looked at Willow, who finally looked back.

"Given the whole freak-a-morph thing, I'd have to say: very powerful fruitcake." Her voice was calm but a firmness lurked underneath. Something there was lurky, but Buffy decided it was the obvious, the aftermath of being welded to your girlfriend by a demented old woman in a tacky turban. Fruitcake. Of course she was.
"Guess you're right. Moot point, anyway."

"The mootest," said Willow in a quiet voice, looking steadily at her.

The End

Chapter End Notes

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
"I'm just saying," Buffy told him, "You don't have to prove anything. Normal is looking a little weird to me right now, anyway." She grunted as the pink demon--what had Spike called it, a Goulash?--got in a swipe across her ribs, ripping her favorite jean jacket to ribbons. "Damn," she complained, and kneecapped it. Which didn't work too well as revenge went; it seemed to be double-jointed. "I mean, the carnival and that whole perky out-of-Buffy experience--ouch, watch my shoes, Mary Kay Hellbeast!--kinda left a sour aftertaste." She was trying to make him feel better, of course; she hoped it sounded convincing.

Spike looked up at her from the ground where he was busy staving off the Goulash's color-coordinated pal. "Yeah? You're not just sayin' that?" He sounded hopeful.

Yeah, I am just saying that, she thought, whacking the demon in the chops. "No," she replied, some of that residual perkiness lightening her voice. And okay, so what if she was lying, she had the whole Cosmo girl thing down, didn't she. Even vampires appreciated an old-fashioned ego stroke now and then. Male ones, anyway.

The demon roared and knocked Buffy's legs out from under her, then fell on top of her with arms outstretched like a professional wrestler, oof!, like the damn thing meant to body-slam her to a mat.

"Still," said Spike, rolling over on top of his demon and punching it repeatedly in the face. "Mean to take you out, good and proper. Never been on a real date, not in all this time. 'S wrong."

"That's not true! We had that moonlight picnic in the graveyard last year." Date, date, date. He was nothing if not obsessive.

"Oh yeah." Spike paused in his punching, looked over at her reflectively. His opponent coughed lavender goo and struggled to free itself. "Doesn't count, though," he decided. "Didn't get all togged and tarted up. Not like Dru and I used to. We painted many a town red." He cocked his head and smiled down at his demon almost fondly as memories carried him back, then made a double-handed fist and smashed it down on the creature's nose.
Buffy shoved off Mary Kay, yanked its arm up behind its back and straddled it, pulling until she heard bones break. "That type of red I can do without, thanks." The demon barked savagely as it wriggled face-down on the grass, and Buffy drew out a knife and thrust it through the back of the neck. It expired, motionless. "Need some help?" she asked, looking over at Spike.

He caught the knife she tossed him and drove it through the demon's eye. It made a wet pulpy sound going in and a sucking sound coming out, and then he thrust it in again, twisting the blade. Buffy watched his white hand tighten on the hilt, working the weapon around the orbital socket, and she felt a tickling clench between her legs. She could blame it on adrenaline, but even so. God, it was sick. Sometimes she thought in another life, not so different from this one, she'd have been Mallory to his Mickey. It was a good thing demons existed, when you thought about it. Where would all her slayerness go otherwise?

Spike wiped the dripping blade off on the demon's tunic and handed it back to her, hilt first. She almost said, *thanks, honey*, stopping herself just in time. They both sat there a silent moment, perched on their cooling demon corpses. Spike was staring down at his with a slight twist of frown.

"Who d'you suppose'll be cleaning these buggers up?" he wondered.

Buffy paused for thought. "Frank," she said after a moment's calculations. "I'm pretty sure he's back on grounds maintenance this week."

"Over his surgery then? Good man. Better than the rest of them put together, I'll tell you--keeps the place extra tidy, always has a friendly word. Must remember to get him a fresh bottle of Glenfiddich." Spike stood and she followed suit. "An' somethin' extra nice for Christmas," he added.

"I was thinking that too." She stepped over the second corpse, allowing herself to take his outstretched hand as she did; he guided her across like Sir Walter Somebody, that guy who draped his cloak in the mud so the queen could pass. An unnecessary gesture, but she liked it.

They wandered to a clean patch of ground, near a crypt that was a smaller and fancier version of Spike's own. Spike's thumb was rubbing slowly across her palm in a suggestive way, its hard smooth edge teasing a rising heat from her. Her breath hitched a little, and she cut a glance his way. His own gaze dipped down in quick response, slanted, almost coy, burning through heavy lashes. As they reached the crypt he stopped and pushed her up against its surface, then leaned close and began deliberately tracing her body with his fingertips. She arched, curling against the marble like ivy on its vine, tilting her face to him in a wordless plea. He kissed her the way a lover should kiss; slow and thorough. He knew how to match his kisses to her moods. When he shoved a thumb hard across one of her nipples, timed to the stab of his tongue, Buffy cried into his mouth and nearly came.

She felt voluptuous, melty, good. Fight sweat was cooling on her body, but he was heating her up again. She took his shoulders in her hands and abruptly reversed their positions, forcing him hard against the wall. He laughed when his head banged the cold stone. She sucked his neck where no pulse beat and shoved her hands up under his shirt, raking him with her fingernails. It was a toss-up what to do next; what she wanted was to go down on him, but teasing him to a merciless assault could be even better. He'd lifted his face up toward the moon, skin white as lunar dust, stark and beautiful; he was breathing for her, moved by desire.

He moved her, and right now she couldn't even remember why that was wrong.

Buffy slid a hand between his legs and worked her touch there. Spike groaned and opened darkly glittering eyes. He stared at her, lips parted, eyelids heavy. Sometimes when he was feeling pleasure he looked faintly astonished, like now, as if he were receiving gifts from her he'd never
expected. It bothered her, which was just two syllables for saying it hurt; if she'd given her heart to
him, such moments might have broken it.

She tightened her grip to provoke a different look from him, got a wince and a wary sharpening
gaze. "Watch the jewels, love." She squeezed harder and he caught his tongue between his teeth
and growled; but he was liking it. He knew what she wanted. Buffy upped the ante, tightening her
grip like a vise, and he began flexing his back against the marble in serpentine motion, pain and
ecstasy driving him to writhe. His face was growing more animated, wilder, his eyes flaring with
dark lust. He was determined to hold out until the pain became unbearable; that was the game. Not
a vampire thing so much as a macho showdown--

--at least until he vamped out, snarling, the bumps curling from his face in bas-relief, one of maybe
half a dozen words she remembered from Art History class.

Gothic, still life, romanticism, chiaroscuro.

Spike bared his fangs playfully and flipped her back against the wall again, and Buffy's heart and
breath widened in her chest, as if birds had just spread their wings inside her.

Renaissance.

He bowed his head tantalizingly to her neck and ran his teeth lightly down the blood-red river
beneath the skin, and she stretched out for him in a parody of surrender. And then he gasped and
lifted his head and stared at her in shock, demon sliding away from his face. Wide-eyed she met
his confusion, mirroring the movement of his head as he slowly looked down to where the bolt of a
crossbow protruded from his chest.

Spike sank to the ground, sliding right out of her hands, but he wasn't dust. He was groaning and
spitting out curses, and Buffy--for a moment paralyzed in ice--recovered from her panic enough to
search the darkness for their attacker. She saw him striding unhurriedly their way through the
graves, sliding another bolt into his weapon. Buffy tensed with recognition.

"Alex," she said.

"Oh bloody hell," said Spike, leaning on one hand, the other cupped around the dripping bolt-point.
"Not some ex-boyfriend of yours, is it?" He glowered up at her darkly, eyes almost more wounded
than chest. He hadn't been around when Alex first hit Sunnydale, which was all to the good.

More sure of Spike's survival, Buffy ignored him for now, but moved between him and Alex with
arms folded against the intrusion. She looked the demon hunter over. He hadn't changed much, still
dressed in the guise of a sleek yuppie who'd wandered away from his Bimmer and gotten lost in the
big, bad cemetery: lightweight leather coat over a tailored suit, inappropriate shoes, thin calfskin
gloves. He'd grown his dark hair into a ponytail since she'd last seen him, though. Now he looked
less like a corporate headhunter, more like a famous designer, except for those assassin-sharp eyes
which said he was neither.

"I told you to leave and not to come back," she said coldly by way of greeting. "The not-coming-
back part wasn't optional. This is still my territory."
Alex's smooth face showed no surprise. "I have business in town. This is me looking you up, as a courtesy." He saluted with his crossbow, before lowering it to point more or less groundward. Not low enough for her liking, but no immediate threat.

"As a damn smart move." Buffy spoke curtly. "'Cause if I saw you first, you'd be just another mess for the groundskeeper to clear away." She paused, eyes narrowing. "No, wait--my bad. Make that a damn stupid move, since you shot my lover in the back."

Score, she thought in fascination, watching his face as he reacted. That got to him. "Wow, you actually made an expression," she said. It was like watching a stone dropped in a lake, shock rippling out. "That's a first. Did it hurt?"

"Your...lover," Alex repeated, glancing down to where Spike sprawled in all his injured glory on the crypt step. He gathered himself together, looked at her with a chill to match her own. "My vision is excellent. Even if he wasn't attacking you, he is a vampire." Contempt rolled smoothly into his voice. "So this is where your sympathies have brought you."

Buffy saw the crossbow lift, his finger edge toward the trigger of the bow. "I really wouldn't do that if I were you," she said. "I'm already a quarter past cranky."

"You sleep with the devil's own breed. I should kill you on principle, don't you think?" Alex smiled faintly, but without humor, and Buffy realized that under the shell of contempt boiled a very real rage.

"Slayer'll tear your knobs off, more like." She could hear Spike shifting behind her as he began pulling himself to his feet. "Should be a giggle."

"He doesn't feed off humans," said Buffy quickly, already regretting what she'd revealed. She'd meant to push Alex's buttons, but she'd forgotten just how ruthless he was. Vengeance was his religion, it was what fed him. There was no room in his philosophy for shades of grey. "In fact," she said, taking Spike's arm as he staggered upright, "he has a soul." She squeezed his arm to preemptively silence him, and felt him stiffen.

Alex raised one brow. "So this is the famous Angel. Your supposed 'proof' that a vampire can be redeemed."

Spike made a choking sound of protest, which Buffy cut short by applying more pressure. "Yes," she said firmly.

"I understand now why you did not want me to meet him, given your relationship." Alex studied Spike. "Or perhaps it was that as proof goes, he isn't very persuasive."

"He has a big arrow through his chest. You try being polite when you have a big arrow through your chest."

"Yeah," said Spike in a soft voice. "Let's give that a test, shall we?" The effect of his menace was undermined by the whole slumping and bleeding thing, but Buffy was strangely cheered by evidence that his heart would go on. So to speak. Robust and rude, he leaned close, accepting her strength, and why she liked him a hell of a lot more than she liked the living human standing in front of her was quite possibly a defining mystery of her life. Both were dangerous, but Alex, with every moral justice on his side--dead wife, mission to dust vamps--chilled her blood while Spike warmed it.

As Alex's gaze moved assessingly to the wound he'd inflicted, Buffy said with a sliver of renewed
fear: "Tell me there was no poison on that bolt." The fear made a blade of her voice.

"None. As you know, I don't usually miss."

Self-consciously Buffy felt Alex's eyes rake over her, knew he'd read her fear and the weakness it represented; was judging her now and finding her wanting. And he was in the right, wasn't he. That was the bitch of it. His moral certainty seemed more certain than ever, while hers was...well, she'd had it once. She'd also had a cross of gold to protect her, a claddagh ring to claim her, a mother to love her. Life stole and lost the things you'd thought safely pocketed. And life had stolen from Alex, too. Or death had.

She sure as hell wasn't going to take it easy on him, though. Give an inch and he'd take a mile, and then he'd take a milepost and hit you over the head with it when your back was turned. "Why are you here?" she asked, impatient to end the strained scene and get Spike away. "And when are you leaving?"

"I'm tracking a demon for a client of mine. A Phadean. Very dangerous."

Buffy raised her brows, diverted despite her best intentions. "Client? You getting paid now? What happened to the purity of your mission, not to mention that independently wealthy lifestyle? Your dry-cleaning bills start hitting boxcar zeroes?"

"I sometimes work pro bono," Alex said calmly. "For tax purposes."

"Fine." Buffy resigned herself, but kept her voice hard. "You can stay until you kill it. Then you'll go. And while you're here, you play by home rules. If I hear any hint that you're using real live people to bait your monster traps, I'll put you in the hospital."

After a long moment of considering her, Alex finally lowered his crossbow fully and nodded. "It's a deal."

Tara was knitting, a little pinched frown between her brows as she counted stitches, and Buffy found the soft clicking movement of her needles mesmerizing, their looping, sliding movements like the arms of an insect building a nest of blue yarn. Plus, she couldn't help but notice, knitting needles would make handy weapons, the kind you could carry in your sleeve or boot. Good for eye-stabbing and body-piercing--the deadly, non-trendy kind, that is. If you could find wooden ones, you could even dust vamps.

Buffy blinked and forced her attention away from the scarf growing from Tara's needles, to rest her gaze instead on Spike, who was pacing back and forth along the nearest set of shelves, one hand absently spidered across his chest, stroking his wound the way a living man might tongue a toothache. His mood hadn't improved since the previous night; he'd kicked her out of the crypt after she'd bandaged him, nursing a drunken sulk. He wasn't thrilled to be posed as Angel, even if saved him from an untimely end at the hands of a fanatic. And though she'd explained in detail who Alex was, he seemed bent on imagining a past romantic liaison between them.

She noticed now that he'd painted his nails black for the first time in months--sloppy work too, only to be expected when you downed an entire bottle of bourbon--and was wearing his trashiest,
gaudiest rings, the kind of junk affected by fifteen-year-old metalheads who'd just rediscovered Metallica. Buffy rolled her eyes.

The bell on the front door tinkled and Xander finally arrived, still covered with the dust of a hard day's work. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "Had to rework some crew assignments at the last minute for a job tomorrow--hey, are those Thin Mints?" Face lit with reverence, he took one and laid it on his tongue like a communion wafer. He closed his eyes and issued a tiny groan, then crunched into it vigorously.

"Mrs Dudley had them in her freezer," said Tara, smiling. "She's trying to diet. They're not too bad for seven months on ice."

Xander nodded in passionate agreement around a mouthful of more cookies, then swallowed. "Man, the Girl Scouts of America rock," he said.

"I was only ever a Brownie," Buffy said wistfully. "I kicked Mindy Kumar and took her beanie. They said I was a bad influence."

The entry bell jingled again and Willow breezed in breathlessly to join them. "Sorry I'm late," she said, dropping her bookbag and taking a seat. She swept a strand of hair from her face. "I got caught up talking after my media culture class with Doctor Magill. He wants me to help facilitate some workshops, and then he asked how my paper was coming. He had some great insights on how the nostalgia industry allows capitalism to create surplus value from the simulation of authentic cultural experiences. That man is the coolest--using the term as a non-ironical signifier, of course."

She broke off and smiled crookedly around the table. This seemed to be a joke. "Of course," said Buffy brightly. She scrutinized her friend, wondering if anyone else thought Willow seemed more tense lately, or if it was just her. The Willow-babble came off a bit forced to her ears, and everything familiar appeared a little off: the set of her face sharper, the dips of her head dippier, the erratic flicker of her glances...well, sometimes Buffy would look up to find Willow watching her, but then her friend would smile and say something perfectly ordinary like, "You want to go out for burgers tonight?" and Buffy would feel silly.

"You left your cell phone at my place this morning," said Tara, taking it from her bag and pushing it across the table to Willow. "I would have called to tell you, but--" She grinned and shrugged, and Willow grinned back and Buffy decided her worries were all in her head; and even if they weren't, maybe it was none of her business. Willow had a life--more of a life than the rest of them. Olympic-class academics and magic, and some sort of Internet jobby on the side, and Tara, and with all of this going on, she was still trying to translate an ancient demon scroll that would save them from a great and terrible darkness. She was bound to have plenty on her mind, some of which she wouldn't share.

"So what's the big news, Buff?" Xander leaned forward on the table, hands clasped together.

Tara looked up from her resumed knitting and said mildly, "Maybe we should wait until Anya's done helping that lady."

"That's Lucinda," said Buffy, craning her neck to verify the owner of the nasal, high-pitched voice. "She's high-maintenance. A good hour, easy."

"I'm surprised Anya puts up with it," Willow said.

"Well, she spends a lot of money. I mean, buckets. Anya says it a high ROI. That's return on
"investment," Buffy added, proud that she could toss off a catchy business buzzword, even if it was borrowed knowledge. She noticed everyone smiling at her, and felt her cheeks pink. Yes, I am the wacky college drop-out with a heart of gold, she thought. Moving on.

"So. The news." She glanced at Spike, who was playing with a dried snake. He caught her eye and put the snake back on its shelf. She didn't really need his attention since he'd heard it once already and was likely to weigh in with snark at every turn, but it was too late now. "We have an old friend in town."

"Oh," said Tara, laying her knitting aside. "'Old friend' as in old friend, or 'old friend' as in--"

"Person none of us want to see who'll try to kill us," finished Xander.

"Well, he probably won't try to kill us." She tried to sound upbeat, but somehow it came out as irony. "It's Alex." Everyone's faces turned various shades of wry and worried.

"So haven't been missing him," said Xander, jaw clenching in instant resentment. "And what makes him think he can just waltz back into Sunnydale after you chucked him out on his Hugo Boss?"

"He's tracking a demon." Connections wired into her brain did their own thing. "And it's funny you should mention," she said, instinctively turning to her fellow females, "but he had this brill Hugo Boss car-coat, buttery black Italian leather and besom pockets, and--" She broke off at their blank expressions. Damn, sometimes she almost missed Cordelia. "And that's really not important."

"Oh," said Spike, lip curling, head tilting slightly. "Pray, do go on. Wouldn't want to skip any detail of his poncey get-up. After all, not like there's anythin' else bears mention, like how he shot a bleedin' arrow through my back. Oh--wait." He gave a tch of disgust.

Buffy tried not to wilt with guilt. This was Spike, after all. And damn it, she'd tried a little Florence Nightingale tenderness last night, and he'd been having none of it.

"He shot you?" Tara said, startled. Willow and Xander looked Spike over and said an eloquent nothing.

"Missed the heart," Spike sniffed casually. "But yeah."

"That's too bad," said Willow in a cool voice. After a second, when heads began to swivel her way, she added, "That he shot you, I mean."

Spike's eyes narrowed at her, but he looked more bemused than angry. Buffy, though, suddenly remembered why she'd been so concerned about Willow lately--it was the touchiness and overt antagonism like this, which seemed new. Or at least, re-new. She didn't know whether to say something or just keep ignoring it.

"Lucky for you he had bad aim, innit, Red?"

Willow's hands tensed on the table, as if she were restraining herself from a spell cast. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she asked, uncharacteristically savage.

No one was prepared for her reaction; even Spike looked momentarily taken aback, but rallied to retort: "No more handy puppy to kick when I'm dust."

Breathing deeply, Willow's shoulders lowered. She looked like a cat coming down off battle-fur. Xander exchanged a glance with Buffy, then said, "Get over yourself, Spike. There are plenty of other puppies in the sea, equally pathetic and--" He hesitated and glanced at Buffy again as if
realizing he'd crossed the unspoken line in front of her.

When Xander didn't finish, Spike's face tightened. He looked at Buffy, then drew himself up at her silence. "Bugger this." She ducked her head as he turned and stalked off. The door to the basement banged a few moments later, and she thought about standing, going after him. It was to that point, the point where she thought about possibilities like that seriously, and for a second life caught up with her--lightning split her down the middle, illumination and heartwood cracking, and she remembered his face last night as the bolt hit, when for a heartbeat--hers--he'd been expecting death. And her own beaten heart as she watched him fall, thinking he might crumble out of her hands, her chained monster. Her killer, her nightstalker, her cross. For a moment he'd meant no less to her than Angel, the shock of memory carrying her back to that night when Faith struck, then shooting her forward again into Spike's arms.

She stood, and everyone looked at her. She stood and she stood, brain as static as her undecided body, her body tensing to follow, and then slowly, carefully, she sat back down.

"So," Xander said, breaking the momentary pause. "Tracking a demon. Did anyone else hope that our man Alex might have reconsidered this whole mission-in-life business, maybe gone into accountancy, or opened up an ice cream parlor?" He looked around.

"The way I remember, the mundane world doesn't rate very high with him," Willow said. "He's the kind of guy who probably spends his free time making bullets and polishing his piece." Her face changed slightly. "You, uh, know what I mean. I mean, it's like grief has burned out every vestige of humanity and left him this shell, built only for one thing. To kill."

Someone moved into Buffy's field of vision, distracting her from the grim note Willow struck, and as her gaze snapped into focus she registered Alex, smiling sardonically down at them.

"Don't mind me," he said, holding up a pink paper bag. "I'm just out shopping."
carry fresh."

Anya held the paper possessively between both hands as she read it; her face betrayed a cruel struggle between dislike of Alex and ingrained appreciation for a big spender. Xander thought she might jitter herself to pieces as the pressure built, until finally she gave a whoosh of breath and found speech. "I'll just be over here filling a very big box," she said at last. She turned away, then turned back briefly. "I'll enjoy taking your cash," she said in a politely rude voice.

With sweeping arrogance worthy of Spike, Alex drew out a chair and sat down, smoothing his coat (which was damn suave, Xander had to admit) around him, in a way that was not so much fastidious as paranoid. He looked like a man checking to make sure his weapons were still in his pockets. God, the man creeped him out.

"Have a seat," said Buffy sarcastically, still standing. She'd folded her arms and seemed disinclined to let her guard down. Xander couldn't blame her; the guy was a stone-cold psycho who'd embraced the whole Dark Knight fantasy too well. Shot her pet vampire, too. And as much as Xander would have liked to shake the hand of anyone else with that notch on his belt, the fact that it was Alex's fine Gucci leather soured his joy.

"I thought I'd do you the favor of briefing you on the demon I'm looking for. In case you should come across it." He lifted one brow, as if this were a prospect rich in irony.

"Fine." Buffy said. "Brief away." She raised her own brows, waved a finger to clarify, "Those are separate commands, just so you know: Be brief. And then go away."

"A Phadean, as I mentioned." Alex looked to Willow, whose gaze sharpened with interest. "You probably won't have heard of its race. They're indigenous to a lower hell with very few means of egress, and usually appear in Northern Asia when they do manage to get across. This one was apparently carried across in unhatched form for use in yao'mo dou, the equivalent of cockfighting, but with demons."

"Lovely," said Willow.

"It is unlovely, I'm afraid." Alex reached into an inner suit pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper. He unfolded it and handed it to Willow.

"Okay, yuch." Willow handed the paper to Xander, who studied it as Alex spoke.

"The entire head is covered in eyes, giving it three-hundred-and-sixty degree vision, and the hind legs and tail are similar to a kangaroo's in design, allowing for high speed, extended leaps, and powerful kicks. The illustration of the right foreleg shows its claws extended to full, proportional length."

"Looks fun," said Buffy when the paper passed to her.

"It is unfun," replied Alex icily, eyes darkening. "It's intelligent, a big eater, and prefers vulnerable targets. Like children."

A silence settled briefly on the table, broken finally by Tara, who asked for all of them, "How do you kill it?"

"It has three hearts, one on each side of the chest and another in the lower belly. Blows to all three are necessary. Decapitation should also be effective."

"We'll keep our eyes out," promised Buffy, and Xander could tell she was serious. A million-eyed
kangaroo demon with a taste for kids, loose in Sunnydale--that was enough to make them all set aside grudges, at least to the extent of helping Batman here kill it.

Alex re-pocketed his sketch. "That would be wise of you," he said. "I will of course tender you a finder's fee, and a more significant commission if you take it out."

"You're killing for money now?" said Willow in surprise. "What happened to 'vengeance is a noble cause'?"

"You misremember my words. Revenge is pointless against demons. I exterminate them." He blinked with precise, cyborgian punctuation. "And I'm doing some pro bono work for a friend."

"You have friends?" said Xander, blandly mimicking curiosity. "Doesn't that interfere with your programming?"

Alex ignored him and looked at Buffy. "How is Angel? He'll live, I take it?"

"Wait, Angel's in town?" Xander swept the table with an accusing gape, but Willow and Tara looked as flummoxed as he felt. "When did he get here?" he asked Buffy. "And why, and also--what the hell?!

"He's great," she said quickly. "That bolt through the chest, just a scratch. He's up and walking and he'll be back to brooding in no time. Brooding and fighting evil. His soul's rarin' to go." She gave Xander a meaningful look that pretended to be apologetic. "I forgot to tell you--he just got in last night." She laughed awkwardly. "Soon as he hits the town limits, bang, he's already getting near fatal injuries. That's Sunnydale,' he said to me. 'Good old Sunnydale.'"

"Forgot my smokes," said Spike brusquely, making everyone jump as he materialized around a corner of the bookcase. He stopped short as he spotted Alex, rearing back unhurriedly in an affected, cobra-like pose of hipster disdain. "Hello. Come back to play poke-the-pinata again?"

"Angel!" said Buffy, leaping up and moving to take Spike's arm. "You should be resting." She grabbed his cigarettes from the table and smacked them into his hand. "Here. Go. Now."

"He walks abroad in daylight?" Alex's forehead creased in a frown, and then he fixed on the cigarettes being pocketed. "And was here earlier."

"They, they just got here," Buffy said, waving at the table. It felt like every muscle in Xander's face was straining to reveal his exaggerated amazement, but he kept it in check.

"It's good to see you, Angel." Tara smiled mischievously. "You dyed your hair."

"Yeah," said Spike, frowning and then arching his brows lightly as he awoke to the opportunity, face lighting with earnestness. "Got sick of that nancy-boy hair gel, thought I'd try somethin' new. Disguise, to throw off my enemies. Always one step ahead of the game, that's me--and fashion conscious, too." His face was settling into even more fatuous lines. "Gotta live up to the rep, y'know. Unlive, should say. After all, justice demands sacrifice. An' of course my fans expect me to stay au courant. Can't skank it around good old L of A, even when you're fightin' evil like a great flamin' poof--oww!" Outraged, he gasped and clutched his chest where Buffy had patted him a little too hard.

"Sorry," said Buffy, with bright falseness. "Are you hurting? You should go lie down."

"You're not what I expected," Alex said, standing and inspecting Spike.
"Yeah? Well, I didn't expect you at all, mate. So call it even."

"Your order's ready." Anya swished up gracefully in her flowered dress, anticipatory of money in hand. "Shall I ring you up?"

There was a silence that went on too long, as Spike and Alex faced off. "Yes," Alex said finally. "Let's do that." He stepped around Spike, clearly taking pains not to brush against him. Spike gave an unimpressed grunt.

Xander clapped his hands sharply and rubbed them together, wiping the slate clean for yet another informative, civilized, and perfectly concluded team meeting. "So, Angel," he said with interest. "When you headed back to L.A.?"

The office, though drab and cramped and decorated only with file cabinets, had that Glade-fresh smell. Lalethki had lived on Earth his entire life, and found the sharp, chemical smells of humans to be one of their few redeeming accomplishments. If he ever did get to visit one of the Hell dimensions, he hoped it smelled of Glade.

He looked at the wall clock. "Avery's late," he noted in satisfaction. No infraction on the human's part went by unremarked.

Clude glanced up from the computer, peering with black eyes over the glasses he affected for close reading. His mottled grey face lengthened in a frown. "He'll be here, Lal," he said with relative mildness.

"When the New Reich takes power, he will find that tardiness is not tolerated." Lalethki picked up a red yo-yo from the desktop, printed with the logo 'Templar Trucking Inc.' He pried apart the two halves and watched the string fall free. No mysteries or magic there, and yet he couldn't figure out how to duplicate the tricks he'd seen children do on the street.

"Yes, yes," murmured Clude.

"You want a grape soda?" asked Lalethki, going to the tiny fridge. No reply. "Working on your report?" He wandered over to stand behind Clude, slurping his soda. He read aloud from over Clude's shoulder: "...and while at the carnival, this agent observed the Slayer and an unidentified Human or Human-Appearing Demon. Height, approximately six foot; curly wheat-colored hair; wire-rimmed spectacles. Possibly boyfriend."

"Wheat-colored?"

"I try for accuracy."

"Do you think General Nilec knows what wheat is?"

"Terran Studies is required of all officers." Clude scratched his cheek in thought, however, then backspaced over 'wheat-colored' and typed in 'blond.'

Lalethki suddenly saw a way to get a leg up on Avery. "Hey, you want I should find out who the wheat guy is?"
"It's irrelevant."

"But if he's with the slayer--"

"I've made note of him," Clude said more firmly. "Anyone found with the slayer will be taken in custody and eliminated. Besides, he poses no threat. He was quite mild-mannered."

"Oww! Ow! Oww! Son of a--" Spike vamped and snapped at the air with almost childish spite as he arched up from the sheets, but with so little real force in his rebellion that Tara was easily able to hold him down.

"Behave."

He devamped, still grimacing with what she suspected to be an affectation of pain. "What the hell did you use in that stuff, witch--crushed red pepper and a nice rough sea salt? I'm not a sodding mackerel here."

"Don't be a baby," she scolded. "You're healing up nicely." She smeared another fingerful of the unguent on his wound. "And you shouldn't feel this at all. It's just a mix of calendula and comfrey, with a little mallow and gingko thrown in--oh, and some gotu kola and croton lechleri."

"Dragon's blood?" Spike translated suspiciously.

"Well, not from real dragons. It's an Amazonian herb."

"If anything sprouts from my chest and grows blossoms--"

"You can always stick it in one of the pots, expand your greenhouse." She dimpled a sly smile at him.

"Conservatory," he corrected, offering a grudging half-smile in return, then moved his head on the pillow to gaze at the nearest array of plants. Something in his sharp face softened, and Tara wondered how often anyone got to see such an unguarded expression there. If Buffy did. Surely she must, though. She'd seen Spike look at Buffy from across a room when he thought no one was paying attention, and imagined those looks were a hundred times brighter in private.

"They're really coming along," she observed. If she hadn't known better, she might have worried about the profusion of greenery, in a vampiric, Audreylike, Little-Shop-of-Horrors way. But on previous inspections, the water bottles and jugs of plant food had reassured her that no creepy magicks were being used to enhance the growth.

"Doin' all right," he said, pretending indifference. His gaze panned absently across the rocky ceiling that blocked all sun. "Not much joy for them down here."

"What about you?" Tara asked, screwing the lid back on her jar of salve and wiping her fingers on her skirt. It was a facile question, but he'd cued it himself, in that grandiose way of his. She thought it might be the poet lingering in him, always speaking in metaphors even when he didn't quite realize it.
"Me?" He looked down at his chest, then sat up against the headboard. "I take my joy where I find it, pet." Spike's face was pensive, then he smirked and extended his arms slightly along the pillows. Raised his eyebrows invitingly at her. "And sometimes I find it here."

"Uh huh." I'll bet you do, Tara thought dryly. She stood, and he crossed his long, black-clad legs at the ankles and flirted up at her. She wondered what he'd do if she really took him up on any of his teasing offers. Well, she knew what, didn't she? If he'd come to the farm when her gran was living, she'd have taken one look at him and nodded wisely, That one'll plow your field, empty your cookie jar, and run off with the chickens.

Tara liked her chickens, and Spike for all his badness loved Buffy. And there was Willow and the fact of complete and utter lesbianism, happy lesbianism, and...well, Spike's badness again. It wasn't a badness she could embrace. Last year, she'd poured all her efforts into finding a means for his redemption, but he'd spurned what few possibilities she came up with.

"Not going to stay a while?" Spike was asking, sitting up now with legs crossed, arms resting loosely on his knees.

She repacked her medicine bag. "I have to get home." Distractedly she sifted the contents of the soft, patchworked sack and touched something cool. It was as if her thoughts had called it to her. Threading her fingers through familiar links, she withdrew the chain. Its small silver cross dangled and swung, and Tara looked over at Spike, couldn't help herself. He was staring at the crucifix as if hypnotized, but tension bunched the muscles in his face and shoulders. Tension and perhaps anger.

"Ulterior motives," he said in a low voice. "Don't suppose I can fault you. Everyone has them, no matter what they say otherwise." But his dark eyes were accusing, even hurt.

"That's not why I came--I just." Tara took a small breath. "Have you ever thought about it?" she asked softly. "What we talked about?"

"Thought about becoming a sainted barbecue? No, can't say it crossed my mind recently." He was as dismissive as she'd expected, retreating under the dark carapace of habit. A century-old, well worn habit. She could only guess how hard it would be to shrug that off.

"Take it," she said suddenly, firmly, holding the cross out. Spike gazed up at her askance, one brow aloft, as if she astounded him with her boldness.

"No, don't think so. But thanks much. Thought that counts, and all that."

"You don't have to wear it. Just...keep it. Put it in a box, toss it in a corner. Whatever." She moved a step closer, hand still outstretched, and saw him give the barest flinch as proximity increased. "I have my own. This is the one I bought for you. So it's yours, unless you want to refuse a gift," she challenged. Politeness and gallantry could strike him at odd times, and were always worth a gamble.

Spike scowled up at her. "Already did, if memory serves." But when she obdurately said nothing, he sighed and gave in. "Just put it on the table."

Tara almost obeyed, but steeled herself to resist the reflex and shook her head. "Take it. It can only burn you if you let it."

He cracked a dark, bitter laugh. "You're still completely off your nut, Sister Mary Mercy." His face tightened. "But fine, you want me to take it?" He grabbed the cross before she could react, wrapped his hand around it. His expression flickered, all his hard edges working, as the smoke
rolled from between his clenched fingers. "There." Spike's lips twisted against the pain and his eyes burned into her, the way the metal must be burning his skin. "Mmm, yeah. Feelin' full of the holy spirit already. Must go...save some orphans now. Drowning Baptists. Baby seals." He grit his teeth and then held his hand over the bedside table and shook the cross loose. It clinked on the wood, still smoking, and before Tara averted her eyes she thought she saw singed flesh adhering to the surface.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"Don't be." Spike picked up a liquor bottle with his burnt hand and knocked back enough of its contents to make Tara feel vicariously queasy. He resurfaced with a brittle smile, eyes that had been dark now glowing with inhuman spirit. "I feel positively incandescent, love."

The darkness was closer than usual where they walked, and fragrant with garbage. A grey rat scuttled across the cement in front of them. Xander wondered about rats more than he used to, like how many might be ex-schoolmates or cheating husbands who'd gotten caught. Odds were that some of these scampering wee beasties were Amy's ex-minions. She'd been wand-wacky and fond of crude irony.

Xander's boot kicked something that rolled a few squishy inches, and he grimaced. Yes, folks, come see Sunnydale after sundown. Just fifty cents a tour, and a free souvenir stake to every survivor. We got your filthy bricks, your inadequate dumpsters, your possibly anthropomorphic vermin. But the strange thing was...it was familiar to him and even kind of beautiful. Moonlight filtered down through the rooftops and gleamed in dark puddles; the debris of the alley stirred in a breeze, and the chainlink fencing that stretched across a side lot...well, that was just chainlink fencing. But satisfying, and well hung.

That thought was not about sex, Xander assured himself.

"You ever notice there are a lot of alleys in Sunnydale?" He glanced up the shadowed walls on either side of them musingly. "And an alley, by its nature, has to exist between two buildings. So what the hell are all these buildings?"

Buffy looked up to her right, gestured casually. "Sunnydale Arms. Transient hotel." Looked to her left. "Offices."

"You have a map of the entire town in the Buffy brain, don't you?"

"Part of the slayer accessory pack." Buffy twirled her stake like a miniature baton across her fingers, then regripped it smartly.

"All these alleys look alike to me." He glanced at his watch as they passed near the wan glow of a security lamp. "Hey. We're officially walking after midnight."

"Just like we used to do."

"Walking after midnight, searching for...a big scary demon with a thousand eyes."
"I don't remember that line from the song." He could feel Buffy's smile in the dark, even without looking over at her profile.

"Well, I took liberties," Xander said diffidently. And for some reason he thought of Anya, who was probably safely at home in bed, or maybe curled up on the couch watching late-night TV. Eating strawberry yogurt in those little cups, licking off the spoon, wearing lacy pajamas. While he was out here walking after midnight in the moonlight, with Buffy. *The way we used to do.* For a minute it was hard to believe it had been five whole years since high school, a time when he'd have given his left nut for just one night with her; even during his temporary insanity with Willow. During Cordelia, ditto. During Anya, in the early days--no question.

He thought he might still commit infidelity for her, with her. If she asked.

"Did you hear something?" Buffy asked, stopping with stake in hand, hand raised. Yanked from his guilty thoughts, Xander stopped with her and listened hard. "Shh," said Buffy, though he'd made no sound. After a half-minute, the line of her shoulders relaxed a notch. "Guess I imagined it," she murmured. They continued walking, choosing their steps more carefully by shared, unspoken instinct. "I* really* want to get this thing. I want Mister Alex No-Last-Name gone."

"He doesn't seem to have changed much. Tall, dark, and sociopathic."

"Sociopath is such a strong word--but accurate." Buffy sighed, peered into a recessed doorway where no demon lurked. "He's driven, that's for sure. And he's not going to slow down until he hits that big wall."

"Or busts an axle, or takes someone out in a fatal hit-and-run accident, or--"

"Or until this metaphor runs out of gas."

"Or that," Xander conceded amiably.

Buffy halted again, lowered her voice: "Okay, I *know* I heard something." She crept forward, Xander on her heels, and together they sidled up along one wall of the alley. Crouching slightly as they reached the edge of the bricks, she peered around, and Xander braced himself with one hand and leaned forward over her.

There was a loading dock. Because there was always a loading dock. But there were no idling trucks or mysterious crates or vampires, just a lone figure standing under a small blue light. The man, or maybe demon, wore a trenchcoat and a fedora and was lighting a cigarette. He was no Humphrey Bogart, though.

Buffy drew her head back. "I know that guy. He was watching me in the graveyard, and oh, *damn* it!" Her groan was as fierce as it could be when issued at whisper level. She smacked herself in the forehead like a buttercup version of Homer Simpson.

"What?" Xander whispered back anxiously. "What?"

"I am so pathetic, so utterly lame. I saw his pal at the carnival--demon with trenchcoat, taking notes. And clever Buffy-bot me accused him of having a crush and then sent him on his merry way. God, I think I gave him skin-care advice and--ohhhh--his notebook."

That was actually pretty sad, but Xander held his tongue from saying so. "You couldn't help it," he reassured her. "You were bewitched."

"Well, now I'm bothered," Buffy said with a little growl. "And over bewildered. I say we grab this
guy and play twenty questions." And without waiting for an answer she darted around the corner at slayer-speed, leaving Xander to catch up. He was only a few seconds behind her, but the loading dock was now deserted.

"Where'd he go?" he asked, climbing the steps after her and looking around.

"Maybe inside." She tried the door handle, then gave it a sharp jerk which dislodged its lock. Xander shook his head in respect as he followed her in. He let her scout, while sweeping his own gaze up and down the narrow hall; every few moments he refixed his attention on her ponytail and jacketed back, not wanting to be taken by surprise if she were jumped, wanting to be there for her, to help. He tried to keep his step light on the floorboards, and breathed with measured care. The hall smelled of astringent cleaning products, dirty water, buffed wax.

It had once been fun to trespass, years ago when slaying was fresh and new, and having the run of the town made him feel special. Part of a club, a rebel with a secret identity. Now it was old hat. He missed those days sometimes; he was squeaking across the line into adulthood at last and suspected he now understood how Giles felt about his Ripper years: halcyon days of great stupidity and yore; danger, violence, and tragedy. Fucked thing was, they were the good old days, his golden youth. Memory yielded a weird nostalgia; it made Xander want to find some pip-squeak, freckle-faced youngster and say of Angelus, *I knew him when*. Come to think of it, when would there be Slayer and Scoobies: The Next Generation? Would they ever get to retire, mentor the youth of tomorrow?

God, what if *he* had a kid? Would *that* be the next generation?

Xander pulled the plug on his distracting thoughts and went to his auxiliary back-up brain, happy to discover that it was still monitoring the situation at hand.

All the doors in the hall were white and bore brass numbers; near most doors were small signs or plaques identifying the business within. Massage therapy, licensed CPA, exports, computer repair, Sunnydale Free Press.

*We have a free press?*

Buffy looked back over her shoulder and pointed ahead to a door from under which a bar of light shone. Xander nodded. It seemed the thing to do. Nod. She moved closer and pressed her ear up against the door. Good way to get a sharp pointy thing through your cranium. He'd seen that in a movie. After half a minute she hastened back to his side, took his arm, and drew him (broken lock number two) into an adjacent office.

"I heard them say something about the municipal water supply," she said in a hushed voice. "And about 'when the New Reich rises,' whatever that means."

"New Reich," he echoed, thinking with almost equal alarm: *municipal water supply*. Bottled water from here on out, check.

Buffy glanced up the nearest wall and climbed up on a desk. She pressed her ear against a small air vent and stood poised there a minute, listening, then jumped back to the carpeted floor on little cat feet. She pressed her finger to her lips. Lurking silently inside the office, they heard footsteps pass by in the hall. When they'd faded, Buffy opened the door and slipped out.

I'm pretty much Following Guy here, thought Xander. He wasn't sure on what plan or principle of timing she operated, but Buffy caught up to Fedora Man as he was leaving the building.
"Hi there," she said, just before she punched him and slammed him up against the wall of the loading dock. "I've been wanting a chat with you. You--you're human?" Surprise mingled with doubt, distracting her from whatever she'd meant to say.

"What else would I be?" The man's voice was guttural, rough.

Caught off guard, Buffy hesitated, then knocked his hat off and studied his face. Even in the dim blue light, Xander could see there was something weird in the greyish tones and bumpy patches. "Looks like your pal's skin condition is catching, though." She squared her shoulders, assurance re-entering her voice. "So hey, I thought since you seem so awfully curious about me, we could share some quality time. Bonding." He twitched as if to run and she shoved him back against the bricks. "Just you and me, slayer to lurker."

She didn't even glance at Xander as she said that; the unnamed supporting cast, that was him--rhubarb, rhubarb--but he spoke up anyway: "Slayer to lurker to guy who'll pop you one if you don't settle down, bub." See, he told himself, even dysfunctional parenting had its uses; it gave you helpful scripts for interrogating guys in dark alleys.

The man's gaze darted between them. "I don't know who you people are," he said. "Here--my wallet's in my pocket. Take it." He began to make a gesture that Buffy interrupted by placing her stake against his wrist.

"Xander, get his wallet."

This reminded him of the fantasy where Buffy said take me away from all this and they went on the lam, conning rich suckers and spending their nightly take in gin joints, before returning to their seedy hotel dive for sweet, sweet love. Feeling his golden youth flex its muscles, Xander dug the wallet out, flipped it open. "Avery Foss. Driver's license, credit card, gym club membership. That's it."

"What do you want with me, Mister Foss? You and your demon friend?"

"Demon? What is that, some kind of teen slang?"

"Yeah," said Buffy. "Right now it means 'thing not of this world, with bumpy grey skin.'" She patted him down, dug into his coat and pulled out a notebook. "What's this?" She held it up a moment then tucked it in her back pocket when he didn't answer. "Bet it's a real page-turner. Will I like it? Go ahead, you can give away the ending."

"That's private property."

"You wrote about me," she said, flipping her hair. "Now it's Buffy property." She stepped back, stake slightly lowered. "Who are you?" she asked impatiently. "And what's all this about our water supply and a 'New Reich'?" Foss remained silent, and Buffy grew visibly angrier. "Don't wanna talk? Okay. Let's see how you handle a truth spell. I'll bet--"

But she bet nothing, because at that moment there was a roar and a shudder as something leapt on the loading dock. Buffy spun and Xander's jaw dropped, because zoinks, that was one ugly sonofabitch of a demon. Body a blend of rubbery-looking skin and dirty fur, a head shaped like a hot-air balloon, a thousand sticky little eyes, like, like, like--

A really gross pin-cushion, he thought, as the demon hissed and bounced on its big legs; and you know, he'd always felt there was something inherently funny about kangaroos, which had apparently been lost in translation, because this creature was no joke. Rich fodder for new
nightmares, yes. Laughable, no.

Buffy preemptively struck, spinning and landing a kick dead center to the chest. The demon fell back on its tail and sprung its own kick that slammed her back across the planks. Foss brushed by Xander as he fled, and Xander spun half-heartedly for a grab at him, then let him go, turning again to see Buffy ducking a whip of the demon's tail. He didn't remember roos doing that; but more importantly, he didn't remember Alex mentioning it. Asshole.

Though surprised, Buffy was already recovering, and as she struck and danced and rolled, he quickly unslung and loaded his crossbow.

When he glanced up, he could see by her face she was regretting her choice of weapon; kicks and giant claws prevented her from getting in range to deliver a heart-blow, and attacks from the rear were thwarted by tail-strikes. She flung the stake aside, and Xander raised the weapon and waited for the right moment, knowing she'd see him. She feinted his way while keeping the Phadean's attention, and the demon turned, presenting him with a clear shot. A whump, a wail, and even if he'd missed the heart, the thing was in pain. Xander reloaded as Buffy followed up with kicks, but the demon leapt away into the darkness.

"Go after it?" he said, bow ready.

"No." She was catching her breath and looked frustrated. "We need bigger weapons. Longer weapons."

"Well, toting javelins in downtown Sunnydale--I'm thinking that wouldn't go unnoticed by the citizenry. Damn shame, too."

"Sword, maybe. I'll have to take a better look over our stores." She scanned the empty alley. "Foss got away?" She shrugged it off at his nod. "Well, we've got his notebook. Maybe it'll tell us something."

Xander cleared his throat, tipped a crooked smile. "Actually I, uh, still have his wallet too."

Buffy's eyes widened a fraction. Breaking and entering, assault, threat of bodily harm, sure, he could sense her thinking. But this? A tiny wince of anxiety escaped her. "Ohhh." Her lower lip jutted out. "We're muggers."

The wallet landed in the middle of the table with a soft, padded thump. "--and then we stole his shoes and pushed his body in a dumpster," Buffy finished on an upbeat note, taking a seat at the dining room table.

Tara and Willow exchanged careful glances while her accomplice in crime slid pizza into his mouth with an expression of sincere gratitude for late-night delivery.

"Y-you are joking, right?" asked Tara. "I mean, of course you are." But her face continued to beg the nervous question.

After another short silence, Buffy slumped and admitted: "We are post-irony, aren't we?"
Tara tilted her head and lifted one shoulder in a sort of apology. "You know about a year ago, when Evil Giles told us to 'eat your hearts out' and it turned out not to be a figure of speech? I've never looked at a metaphor the same way since."

Willow glanced up from Foss's notebook and nodded, regretful and wry. "We have to face it. An era has passed. The quip is dead, the witty turn of phrase has become passe."

"You're right," said Buffy, taking some pizza. "I'm throwing in the towel. It's all artless sincerity and strict literalism from here on out."

"Yeah, but let's not fly off the handle." Xander glanced around, tone serious. "We might want to let our hair down once in a while--keep our hand in." He waved his hand flatly across the table to echo his sentiment. "Maybe we could find a happy medium."

"No," said Tara firmly, shaking her head, equally earnest. "I think this is just what the doctor ordered. No more figurative language. Except for similes, which aren't really like metaphors--different as night and day, when you think about it." She looked around for confirmation, brows raised.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," said Buffy, nodding smartly. She raised her soda in a toast, and the others echoed her gesture. "To the end of an era. Death to, uh--" She looked to Willow for help.

"Death to the idiom," finished Willow.

"Death to the idiom," everyone chorused, glasses clinking.

There was pizza-chewing all around, and Xander said thoughtfully, "You don't think we're going overboard, do you?" which was either about pizza or literalism, Buffy wasn't precisely sure, but she put back the wedge she'd reached for and sighed; one slice and she was already feeling full. And dangerously cheesy. Better to leave the rest for Dawn, who liked pizza for breakfast.

"So, what do you think?" she asked Willow, wiping her hands on a napkin. "Is it a code?"

Willow, frowning and flipping through the notebook again, didn't look up. The ceiling lamp drew glossy highlights from the crown of her flame-red hair, turned her hands white. "Not sure yet. First I'll need to check some books at the shop, see if I can match it up against any of the known demon languages." She finally met Buffy's eyes. "If it is a code in another language, it may take a while to figure this out."

A small frown of her own appeared. "Sure," Buffy said, forcing down her natural inclination to impatience. "Of course. But speaking of translations--" She watched Willow's face closely, and this time saw the moment when it closed, like one of those rolling things on a store-front banging down. Buffy took a deep breath. "How's our prophecy coming?" Am I asking that too often? she wondered. Does she think I'm disappointed in her? Willow seemed extra-sensitive on the subject.

"It's coming," said Willow. "Slowly." She broke the last word off, offered it like a piece of brittle candy--so grudgingly that Buffy felt ashamed without knowing why.

Even Xander seemed to sense something; he smiled slightly at Willow. "Must be a killer. Usually you're all, 'Ooh, cool verb--pronouns yay.'"

"It's a bit more complicated than that." And Willow's voice was still hard, making Buffy uneasy. "I have to translate the language and decipher any numeric codes overlaying the passage; cross-reference against likely contemporaneous sources the Naciran author might have used; then rule
out any other exegetical interpretations--it's not like I can just go to Amazon.com and order a handy Naciran-English dictionary. Nine ninety-five, here's your portents, guys. Evil solved."

Xander's jaw had dropped enough to show him biting his tongue in a very literal way. When she finished he said: "Will, relax. No one's saying it's easy."

"It's not. But if anyone else wants to take a crack, be my guest."

"I'm not trying to put any pressure on you, Will." Buffy tried to hold her friend's restless eye and communicate her good faith, but Willow kept fidgeting, looking away. Buffy sensed her tension rising, needle into the red, and kept her voice level. "But after tonight, I'm wondering if there's a connection between the prophecy and these black hat guys--demons and humans don't socialize without a common cause, and I don't think theirs is 'save the children'. I told you the kind of stuff they were talking about. This whole 'New Reich' thing, and the water supply--there's no way that's good. If something big is coming, I want as much advance warning as possible, so we can get ready."

"I want that too." Willow's voice was nearly a whisper, and she stared dully out across the table. Her lower lip suddenly trembled, and tears spilled. Crying, she leaned forward to hide her face. Shocked, Buffy came around the table to hover, as Tara leaned close on Willow's other side, running a hand soothingly over her back. Their eyes met over Willow's bowed head. "Will, it's okay. It'll be all right. You've been working yourself too hard, that's all. God, you probably need a break, not me pushing you. You didn't say anything, but I should have known--I'm sorry--"

"Stop!" cried Willow, looking up at Buffy sniffle-faced, her cheeks patchy and pink, eyes wetly miserable. "Don't apologize, Buffy! I'm a, a horrible--I should have had this for you by now."

"No, don't say that," Buffy was firm. "You're doing the best you can. And that's so much better than any of us could do."

"No," Willow said in a whisper, face threatening to crumple again. "It's really not."

The Bronze was throbbing with some kind of techno-funk beat, the mating of a synthesizer and a drum machine, synchronized to the flashing ceiling lights. The music wasn't as loud as it might have been but it still made Willow vaguely nauseated, sloshing around in her head along with the two Champagne Flamingos she'd had so far. She held the stem of her third drink, and wished she'd been able to make herself decline a night of clubbing.

"How's your flamingo?" asked Buffy, leaning in unnecessarily to be heard. "You tucked those first two away pretty quickly."

"I'm managing it." Willow took a sip to prove she was, and set the glass back down. It kind of annoyed her to be invited out and then have Buffy try to supervise her alcohol intake. You could read everything on Buffy's face; her worry, her guilt, her super-charged cheer. And here was the
quintessential problem of Buffy: she was either not all there, or way too much there. Tonight she was Buffy to the max, a heavy presence at Willow's side of wide-eyed looks and fruity perfume and jingling bracelets. On the other side, Tara: too, too solid Tara. Rock and a hard place. And in no way figurative, Willow was trapped, blocked in by their chairs and thighs at the crowded table.

"This is fun," said Buffy, as if trying to convince them or herself. "A new day, a new night. Get away from things for a while--a few hours, anyway. Forget about the worries on your mind, leave them all behind, feel the beat of the rhythm of the...." She trailed off apologetically.

Have fun, get away from things, Buffy said, but she was drinking soda, because she'd be out there patrolling later. It was all a sham, thought Willow. Liven up the Willow. And how could you have any real fun when everyone was there merely for your benefit, to shore you up, to be audience and chaperones and...friends. She looked at her friends' faces and wanted to cry again, weepy Willow, but she didn't. Wouldn't.

Xander and Anya came tripping happily back from the dance floor at the same moment Spike returned from the bar with his beer, and suddenly the table was even more densely crowded. A crush, a circle of life, life, life, closing in on Willow, reminding her of everything she put at risk by not sharing her visions. And amidst all the life, there was one wrong note. Her hands trembled on her cocktail glass, and she saw--

flash--Spike staring at her from across the table, wearing an elegant black uniform and a cold little smile and--

flash--he was himself again, frowning at her, bemused.

"Got something on my face, do I?" he asked sardonically, but maybe self-consciously too. She'd put him off balance lately; she'd tried to play it cool, but suspected she'd failed.

If he saw her as a threat, maybe that was for the best.

When she said nothing, Tara answered, "Just a lot of face." And smiled at him. As if he were their friend. Willow felt sick. But more sickening still was the vision of Tara torn from her, blood flowing from her mouth at the moment of death. This was the lesser of two evils. What would be, would be.

"I think we're getting too old for this crowd," said Xander, shiny and limp from his exertions on the dance floor.

"That's ridiculous," said Anya. "You're only twenty-three. And so am I. My driver's license says so. Of course, if you add us together we're forty-six. That's nearly Giles's age." Struck by angst, she exclaimed: "Oh my god, Xander--together we're old!"

"I feel forty-six," said Xander. "Compared to these," he waved a hand, "kids."

"Babies, the lot of you," said Spike, snorting dismissively before taking a pull of his beer. Willow watched the sliding movement of his throat and thought of blood. The lights above them strobed wildly, then half cut out, darkening the club; the music changed to a slower beat. Spike stared at Buffy, a charged look, and out of the corner of her eye, Willow could sense Buffy gazing back. And then Spike tipped his head almost imperceptibly toward the dance floor, an invitation.

And no, no, Willow didn't want to see them dance, she really didn't; she could imagine them moving sinuously together in a language that pre-dated writing or speech, and if she saw what their bodies said, everything that went unspoken would be out there. She wouldn't be able to deny her fears any longer, that Buffy might feel something for Spike that wasn't just sex.

Abruptly she rocked in her chair, trying to dislodge herself, prompting Tara and Buffy to scooch their own chairs aside for her. "I have to, uh, go to the bathroom," she said, but the strap of her
purse was caught, and she couldn't get her other leg out from between the tight chairs, and she hated when everyone looked at her, and--

"So this is how the brave band prepares itself for the hunt. Getting liquored up and libidinous." Alex's gaze drifted across the table littered with drinks, and then up to their startled faces. "Amateurish, but it seems to do the trick. You do kill your share of beasts." He turned his head an ironic fraction to greet Spike: "Angel."

Spike rolled his eyes, clearly over his masquerade.

"You're here too," said Buffy pointedly to Alex.

"I was looking for you. Your sister said I would find you here."

"What do you want?" Short, hard, wary. As usual, Buffy was their spokesperson.

"To congratulate you on the wound you inflicted last night." Alex pulled out a pack of cigarettes and poked one into his mouth, as Spike considered him with fresh interest, perhaps feeling brief kinship for a fellow smoker. Alex flicked open his lighter and paused to ignite. Buffy sighed and kicked her feet against her chair rungs, made restless by the dramatic pause. "I tracked down the Phadean in the early morning hours," he said, snapping his lighter shut. "I took out its second heart. It will be weaker now."


Anya frowned at Buffy, then looked to Alex. "It was Xander who made the shot," she informed him. "He had the cross-bow."


"No," said Anya defensively. "You should get the credit."

"It's no big deal," he said tightly, to her; to all of them. "We both did our part. That's what we do. It's called teamwork." He stared at Alex, lip curling, as he said this.

Blowing smoke, Alex feigned a smile. "Teamwork is overly prized in this corporate, football society of ours. A team is like a chain, only as strong as its weakest link." His slow gaze slid like a clock hand around the table--Tara, Willow, Buffy, Xander, Anya, Spike--as if he were trying to decide who among them was the weakest. When his eyes passed across her, Willow flushed.

His gaze ended on Spike, who seemed as ticked as Willow felt, looking askance at the demon hunter, a frown etched between his brows as if he were seriously wondering how to eradicate something he couldn't kill. "You've done made your speech," said Spike. "Pretty sentiment, and another time I'd buy you a drink, one misanthrope to another an' all that." He straightened from his slouch against the table, body a warning. "But you're botherin' our uncynical kiddies here, so why don't you run along now."

"I don't take direction from vampires."

"Then I'll tell you," said Xander. "Sod off."

Alex looked at him, faintly pitying, an expression trapped under a foot of ice. "You still have no strong male role models, do you? You could have been so much more than an effete hanger-on, with the right guidance."
Xander lurched up, hampered as Willow had been by the constricting arrangement of seats. Anya tried to grab his arm, but he pulled away and came around the table. Spike stepped back to let him pass. Briefly fixing on his face, Willow saw in his parted lips and gleaming eyes the fascination at possible violence; knew he welcomed the diversion, the appearance of someone who cast his own flaws into shade. And then Xander closed with Alex, and her worry focused there. Next to her, Buffy shoved back her seat and hesitated, poised to help.

"You're not as smart as you think you are," said Xander, smiling through rigid calm. "You have zero insight. Your barbs keep missing the mark and you don't even realize it. I hope your aim is more accurate when it comes to demons. But you know what? Your stupidity doesn't excuse you and neither does your dead wife. We didn't ask to guest star in your Sunnydale sequel. So get the hell out of here. Go back to your team of one, and try a little harder to get yourself killed this time."

Alex's jaw moved as if he were tasting something bitter he couldn't spit out, and he turned and left without another word. Stiffly, Xander watched him go.

Spike, whose brows had climbed ceilingward, relaxed his incredulous expression and said with dry respect, or a parody of caution: "Stand down, soldier."

"Oh god," said Xander, turning to the table. "Tell me I didn't just face off with a sociopath who likes to use casual acquaintances as demon bait?"

"Very mannish of you," said Spike, clapping him on the shoulder and picking up a full shot glass with his other hand. "Have a drink."

Oblivious to Spike's subtle jibe, Xander took the glass by instinct and tossed it back in one gulp. "Hwahhhh," he breathed, glassy-eyed. "I'm fine, I'm fine."

And Willow just watched and listened to the warm congratulations of Anya and Tara and Buffy, their voices and gestures surrounding her like a brightly colored bubble, while the light above the small table shone down on the litter of their revelry, the half-empty glasses, the ashtray, the plate of picked hot-wings; but she said nothing. Because the real villain was still standing among them, and their bright world was ending.

Flickering shadows grew from flickering candles, from drafts that slid across the cool dusty surface of the cave floor, trailing them to the bed where they lay.

"Ohh," protested Buffy, as he lazily kissed her breasts through her shirt. "This was supposed to be a quickie. You're not being...quick."

"You got somewhere to be?" Spike asked, pushing her shirt up along her ribs. The silky material was nearly the color of her skin, and smelled of her. He was getting harder; he darted his tongue across her flesh and rubbed his hips on the bedsheets.

"You know I...oh. I have to...demon."

Spike scoffed against her belly. "Think this mighty demon hunter might have been embellishing just a tad. Your Argus-eyed monster's done nothin' but snack on dogs so far. Maybe a vagrant or
"Hey," Buffy slapped his head, "I care about the homeless."

Ears ringing, Spike propped himself up and scowled, pretending to impatience. No need to let her know how delicious she was, even being all moralistic and whiny. "Just sayin', whatever it's eaten hasn't made the evening news, has it? And no news means no reason for you to wallow in sticky slayer guilt. If you're bent on brooding, take it out of my bed." Issuing ultimatums. Very satisfying. At least when she was too worked up to flounce off.

She leaned on her elbows and tried to look disapproving, as if she was giving serious thought to his suggestion, then she sighed and slid back, stretching her arms prettily above her head, which moved like a golden cat settling on his pillow.

"One hour," Buffy said, and looked down through her lashes at the curve of his skull, the sleek white-blond cap of his hair. He'd bent his head again, was doing things to her with his soft lips, right around where the halves of her body divided, touches descending to the lower half where she felt like a mermaid, salty and slippery. She felt quite the girl, ready to lap up his attentions, ready to be lapped. And then he rose gracefully to his knees on the decadent sheets and pulled off his shirt, and Buffy's gaze was drawn to the healing wound in his chest. Already closed over, no more than a reddened patch of skin, but he'd be vulnerable there while his insides knitted themselves together.

She sat up and saw surprise flash across his face, a moment of faint worry that she might have reconsidered, before she deliberately drew off her own shirt. The crypt's cool air chafed her nipples. He was motionless but his gaze roved across her skin, and then his lips parted silently and ever so slightly, and she couldn't tell if he was scared or aroused, or feeling the fangs of love in his body, like she imagined love must feel. For him.

She touched his chest. "Does it still hurt?"

"Not much," he said softly, gazing at her from a distance of mere inches, as if she mesmerized him. "Nice clean wound. In and out." He raised one hand to take her fingers between his own, stroked them. Cool fingers, messy black nail polish, ugly rings. Painted jealousy, but gentleness in his hands. He'd been jealous of Alex, who'd shot him. And what must it be like for him, to be shot by a guy and then to worry that his--girlfriend, beloved? she didn't have a name really, and 'lover' was just a word she'd thrown in Alex's face to shock him--but to worry that his lover might have a thing for a man who'd tried to kill him? He'd really feared that, it was irrational and stupid and crazy, but he'd feared that, just because he was a vampire and Alex was human.

Buffy believed she understood what he was thinking, feeling. When they were this close, barely a whisper between them, no barriers but skin, his fears were obvious.

"When I thought you--" she said, and took a breath. "I thought you were going to die. And I--"

"You what," he murmured hopefully, eyes bright, fingers tightening on hers.

"I this," she said. And Buffy kissed his lips, neck, shoulder. And up again to his cheek, his forehead, his nose. She took his head between both her hands and kissed his mouth, and he opened for her with a little groan like a sob. She pushed him onto his back, raked her hands through his hair until it curled around her fingers. Spike's arms laced around her back; his own hands caressing the slope of her body. His cock was rigid, a solid bar of heat in his jeans that teased her own ache where she moved against him. She snapped the top button, freed him from the zipper, took him in her hand. He gasped, blue eyes flying open wide, desperation etched on his face. Soft and hard in
her hand, he pulsed. Buffy could feel it, and it had to be magic, didn't it? Nothing made sense otherwise.

She had to let him go to remove her own jeans, and Spike flung an arm over his eyes while she did, as if he couldn't bear to watch anymore. And god, he was such a romantic sometimes, so besotted and beautiful, taking his pleasure like a woman, which maybe made her a really strange breed of lesbian, and she didn't know where she got these ideas, but she liked him on his back, trembling and waiting. Her pussy tightened into a wet, sore clench even before she sank down astride him.

Spike cried out when she did, his throat corded with anguish, and he uncovered his eyes and took her hips in his strong hands. He was snarling, animal wild as he surged under her. But Buffy could tame him. Only in moments like this could she tame him, but that was something. She pinned his wrists above his head, leaning down--breasts brushing against his chest, which made him groan--and rode him, telegraphing with her eyes that she wanted him still. He quieted obediently for a moment, gazing up at her with yearning, but choked back sounds of pleasure as she worked herself around his hardness, and she watched his face growing more focused, more human in need and longing, and he, he--

"Buffy," he gasped. "I love you. Oh god, I love you!"

And she released his wrists and arched upright, stroking herself frantically as he came, as her body clutched him.

And he was softening. She could feel it. He was.

Buffy left Spike sprawled asleep on top of his covers, melted like cheese on toast and still clad in his jeans, which she'd primly rezipped for him after he'd conked out. He wasn't usually toast-guy after one round, but she attributed that to his recent injury.

Outside, the night was quiet, no breeze rustling the oleander, no dogs barking. She walked with a relaxed, unhurried gait across the graveyard, daring any monster to mess with her afterglow. It was an almost happy glow. Orgasms good, she thought in contentment. Orgasms powerful. And she idly wondered if she could train Spike to good behavior through sex alone--wondered if she already had. But it was more than that, for him. It was--

Avery Foss.

"You again," she said. They were face to face at the graveyard gate, both of them having stopped short in surprise, Buffy on the verge of leaving, Foss entering. "We have to stop meeting like this."

Whoever or whatever Foss was looking for, Buffy clearly wasn't it. Startled, he whirled to make his escape, but she grabbed his arm. "Oh no you don't." She walloped him and he crumpled, his fedora knocked to the ground.

"Bitch," he said.

"Since I've reclaimed that word in the name of girl power, I won't thump you." Buffy hauled him up by his collar, then reconsidered and punched him in the gut. "Sorry! Woo! Unpredictable me."
Foss straightened up with another curse, but she was used to ignoring cranky punching bags. "I still have one or two--oh, let's just say a lot of questions for you."

"Look, girl. I think you've got the wrong idea about me. I'm only doing a job. I'm trying to find out how some young fella got whacked. It happened a few months ago, right around here. I'm a private investigator."

"And I'm a fairy princess," Buffy said brightly, before starching her face again. "Now come on." He stumbled alongside her as she retraced her steps to the crypt, but dug in his heels and halted when he saw their destination. Buffy geared up for a fight. "Don't make me drag you."

"Why are we going in there?" The man licked his lips, a fast swipe of nervousness.

Buffy tipped her head and said straight-faced, "I'm going to chain you up and feed you to my vampire. And then we'll have a nice long talk."

Foss bolted. Buffy rolled her eyes and recaptured him. A nifty chokehold drained the fight from him, and she lugged his heavy body inside. "Spike," she called from the head of the ladder. He appeared after a few moments, pale face tilting up at her from the shadows in squinty confusion as he pulled on a loose shirt.

"Who's that?" he asked, looking at her captive.

"Help me," she complained.

He came halfway up the ladder and Buffy lowered Foss into his grasp, climbing down as she did. "This is one of those guys who's been spying on me."

"Oh yeah?" Spike glared at his armful of slumped human, in the resentful way he had when he couldn't inflict damage.

"Want some wall art?" Buffy asked.

Spike raised a brow, but helped her manacle Foss to the rock wall. When he was secured, Buffy slapped him awake. Spike stood off to one side, watching with keen interest.

"Wakey wakey." Buffy took Foss's jaw in her hand and commanded his gaze. Foss's eyes slid immediately to Spike though, and he stiffened.

"Spike, meet Avery Foss. Foss, Spike. Make him angry and you're his chew toy. Got that?"

Playing along, Spike cozied up to her and slid an arm around her waist. She glanced up to find him inspecting their captive, eyes deeply hooded and a small, dangerous smile ghosting his lips. Buffy thought if she were the one chained up, she might even be alarmed. If she didn't know he was fangless. And that he watched Passions and liked onion rings and had stolen Xander's entire collection of Sandman graphic novels for bedtime reading, years ago.

"Looks juicy," he said, poking a finger into the padded flesh under Foss's jaw before sliding his fingers down the man's jugular in a disturbingly familiar way. It took Buffy a moment to identify the intimacy in his touch--it was not unlike how he caressed her when they made love.

She shook off her inner ugh of distaste. "I'm going to get Will. A truth spell is the quickest way to find out what we need to know. Watch him, okay? And only light snacking. We need him coherent." She kissed him lightly and slipped away.
Spike watched her go, feeling all gooey-centered and tender. Just a charade, no way he could really
snack, but it stirred his fantasies, this hint of how they could have been together. If she'd been the
kind of girl who'd let a vamp feed on the wicked, as was proper. He turned to Foss and leered. Not
much to look at, this fellow who could have been his evening meal, if not for a pin's worth of metal
lodged in his own skull. Pale puffy skin, unshaven cheeks, and hair like the ass-end of a mutt. He
smelled sweaty and sharp, not at all tasty, but Spike sidled up nonetheless, thinking he might soften
the blighter for Red's spells.

"Light snacking, she said." Spike pretended to muse. "Lucky for you I've just had din-dins." He
rubbed his stomach, made a satisfied face. "Full as a tick, I am. Still, if she doesn't hurry back, I
might come over peckish for dessert." He sniffed Foss's neck where the pulse was beating more
rapidly. A sharp pain gripped his head, and he winced. Fine. Hell. So he was hungry. So what?
Wasn't like he could do anything about it. Bloody stupid chip.

"You smell like curry, mate." Spike straightened. "Always did like a good curry," he lied. Angry,
his violent impulses thwarted by human technology, he wandered off to find his cigarettes. Came
back with one lit and puffed smoke in Foss's face, then took the cigarette and ran its burning tip
with slow, careful attention down the man's neck, not quite brushing his clammy skin. Took self-
control not to buckle at the strain, but he meant no harm, did he?

"Listen," said Foss. "I don't know why you're helping the slayer, but I can help you."

"Can you now?" Spike projected boredom, stuck the cigarette back between his lips. Privately he
was unsurprised. Chess. Everyone played it. Slide your pawn across the board and hope for the
best. A hundred odd years of gaming, maneuvering in the darkness: such was his unlife. He waited
to hear the play, and in the grey tunnels of his mind, his thoughts twisted and darted: was he bored?
Could he be interested in anything, could he be played, could he play this to his own advantage,
and what was it, really, that he wanted--would he know it if he heard it? Questions that swirled in
him every day and night like phosphorus on restless waves.

"There's a new order coming to Sunnydale. The righteous will inherit the earth, and all that is their
due. You could be one of the elect, vampire. There is a place for you and your kind."

"That so?" Spike had heard this all before. Everyone had a big plan, take over the earth, enslave
humanity, yadda bleedin' yadda.

"When the Reich rises, humans will bow down before their masters. And those who have been cast
out will reclaim the riches of this plane."

Spike blinked, reluctantly intrigued by the man's fanaticism. "Ri-i-i-i-ght," he drawled, frowning.
"So, pardon my gaucherie for stating the obvious, but you are human."

"I will be given new form in the master race."

"Hope you got that in writing."

"My transformation already begins," said Foss proudly, lifting his chin and showing off to best
advantage the rough patchwork of his face.

"Oh, yeah? Didn't want to say nothin'. Thought it was a rash." It dawned on Spike that his chew toy
here was singing canary-like in Buffy's absence, and he wondered how many encores he could
squeeze out. "What do I have to do then? Can't sell my soul, already lost that."

"You need only swear your allegiance to--" But Foss hesitated, looking over Spike's shoulder, and
Spike, alerted, jerked away just in time to avoid a nasty *whump* of arrow in the back again. The bolt hit the wall, sending shards of rock flying, and another bolt streaked by his arm as he spun away, to embed itself in the cave's shadows.

"Damn!" Spike barked aggrievedly, darting behind a potted palm. Two out of three shots, all counting; no better than Harmony when she had him in her sights, but this mad bugger had more under the cranium than Harm, and was reloading. "Hey--private residence here! D'you mind?"

Alex bloody what's-his-name drew back his bow and looked up. "I had my suspicions," he said with admirable calm. Ice water in those veins. "But the disappointment is still very real. I thought the slayer better than this."

Spike's jaw tightened in suppressed anger. He considered his options. To the left, an arch in the rocks led to subtunnels; to the right was his lair, which lacked any cover. He'd have to pass well-dressed Vigilante Boy here to get up the ladder, and light-footed though he may be, Spike didn't reckon his odds of getting by unventilated. Of course, a bloody houseplant wasn't exactly solid cover and he'd be twice-damned if he'd cower in his own home. Not when he'd so handily repelled every ambush to date and just stolen a new rug. Braving himself to foolishness, Spike stepped out from behind the plant and stood poised to dodge.

"What's your beef, anyw--Christ!" The man's arm came up unhesitatingly to loose another bolt, and only vampire-quick reflexes drove Spike from its path. He gave up his bravado in favor of safety, taxing flesh to its supernatural limits by springing away into the tunnel mouth. "Wanker," he muttered, picking his way quietly among the strewn rubble that backed his cave. Rock crumbled damp and loose from the alcove in which they'd chained Foss, creating a rough window which Spike carefully stepped up to peep through.

He found himself face to face with Alex over Foss's shoulder, and leapt back at once, keeping himself flattened to the side. No more missiles came at him, though. Instead he heard the rattling of manacles. Spike swore beneath his breath, and looked around the dripping tunnel, grimacing in frustration at his own helplessness. He could maybe lob a few rocks at Alex but he didn't think that'd get him very far except to the next headache.

"Slayer's not going to be too happy with you if you let him go," he said, projecting his voice to carry through the opening in the rocks.

"Perhaps you can get carry-out instead of delivery," came the fellow's snide voice.

Spike frowned. "What the hell are you on about?"

"If I don't kill you, tell the slayer that my own happiness is less than robust. I don't appreciate being lied to."

"Oh, right," said Spike. "Now--I admit this looks bad, but 's not what you think. He's just a prisoner. I'm keeping an eye on him till the slayer returns."

"You lie as unconvincingly as she does, Angelus."

"I'm not--" Angelus, he thought in utter disgust. "Not lying. Look, I know I probably sound dubious to your soft, pink ears, mate. I spent a solid century deceitful of tongue, and that takes a toll. Doesn't matter what I say now." Clink, clink, rattle went the chains. "Could tell you I'm a vampire, still sounds like I'm lying. Point is, I'm not. That's not dinner, but a very important, er--" Annoyed, he realized that he had no idea who their prisoner was, really, and that his hesitation made him sound that much less credible. "Spy-type person," he finished with a sigh, waving an unseen hand.
"In a fedora."

"He's not wearing a fedora."

"Huh. Must have fallen off then."

"She said she was going to feed me to her vampire," said Foss. "He said he was going to snack on me like a curry."

"Shut up," said Spike and Alex simultaneously. Spike shook his head in disgust at hearing himself misrepresented. He'd merely implied curry snacking. "I heard what she said," Alex continued, speaking to Foss. "That's why I'm here. You're lucky I was passing by. And that I pick locks. Not everyone does."

"He sniffed me," Foss said in a low, vindictive voice, then added at a higher pitch: "Can't you hurry with those chains?"

"I'm risking my life to free you," said Alex, finally betraying a hint of feeling that sounded suspiciously like annoyance. "If you can't be grateful, at least try not to snivel."

"No fun being the hero, is it?" asked Spike, pulling his cigarettes out of his pocket and lighting one. "Never a bloody thank-you. It's always, 'Oh, Angel, did you behead that Huasca demon yet?' and 'Oh, Angel, the homicidal shaman came back and killed another priest!' And once you take 'em out, no time to brood or shag the trussed and tearful blonde, it's grab a mop, Angel, and clear out the guts. No rest for the used-to-be-wicked, let me tell you."

I am an amazing actor, thought Spike idly. Could have earned my living on the stage.

"Who's Angel?" asked Foss.

Oh, bloody...

"He would be that toothy creature lurking behind you," Alex answered dryly.

"I thought his name was Spike."

...hell, thought Spike.

Heavy, slithery clanking--and a quick peek around the rocks--revealed that one of Foss's arms had been freed. At this rate, thought Spike, Buffy might return. But at the same rate, she'd be as cranky with him as she was with Alex. Well. Wasn't entirely his fault, was it. Alex had kicked off with the name-calling.

Spike leaned back against the stone, resting one foot on a pile of rubble, and blew a thoughtful coil of smoke ceilingward. Pointless to try and recover any ground, but how else was he to pass the time? "Spike's just a cover name, y'know. Sobriquet as it were." He flicked ash from his fag, lips curving in irony. "So many plots to kill me, got to be careful. Travel incognito. Never make reservations on the company card, that sort of thing."

Clink, slither, clatter. Crap, Spike thought, face melting into a scowl. "Come on," he heard Alex say impatiently, and then their footsteps retreating. Spike skimmed in barefoot haste over rough rocks toward another exit he knew of, further down the tunnel. In the semi-darkness, he kicked a rat inadvertently, stepped on something that made him bleed, and splashed in gritty water until he found the steps, makeshift and decaying, which led to a cunningly designed grave marker. It was hinged like a door, relic of some clever old vamp of yesteryear, or maybe rum runners. He climbed
up and popped out a few hundred yards from his crypt, right away spotting Foss and Fashion Plate footing it across the grass.

He levered himself out of the ground and padded stealthily from tree to tree, shadowing them from a few dozen yards' distance. They'd diverge any moment now. He'd track Foss to where the bastard lived, then report back to Buffy to collect a hero's thanks. Or, if he was lucky, one of those cherry-mouthed kisses she seemed more inclined to bestow of late.

Skulking, his thoughts dwelling fondly on ripe cherries, Spike was as startled as the humans he followed when the giant demon hopped onto the scene.

Argus, yeah. Not inappropriate for the critter, which was looking every which way at once but zeroing in on dinner as if it saw nothing else. Even as Spike was scrutinizing its anatomical peculiarities its lope lengthened and it sprang for the nearest human, who happened to be Foss. It did, Spike observed, a terribly interesting thing when attacking, bouncing off its tail to scissor the human between its legs and rolling to one side, sort of like a croc diving with its prey, except here it was thighs not jaws, and the fellow's neck was being snapped. There was a scream and a loud celery-like crunch, and then an unmoving body.

Well, there's a development, thought Spike. He stepped out from behind a tree and leaned on it to watch, resting one arm on a low-hanging branch. Thought about lighting a cigarette, because violence was always enhanced by nicotine, at least when spectating. Decided to leave his hands free, just in case. Hotshot had some moves on him, though. Spike thought he might actually take down the beastie. He was quite a loop-de-loop artist, ninja-kicking and flinging himself among the tombstones. Every time he got some distance he tried to fire off his cross-bow. Sometimes managed to, sometimes didn't.

"I could watch this all night," Spike mused aloud to himself, then straightened up as he saw Buffy racing toward the action like an Amazon, Willow on her heels. "Hell," he muttered, sparing a glance down at his bare feet before dashing out to assist. Barefoot, empty-handed, recovering from a serious wound courtesy of the prat he was about to help--really, he asked himself, when you stopped to think about it, what sort of humans actually did this sort of thing? Only movie heroes and madmen. So what was his own excuse--over-compensation? When did William the Bloody become Prince Sodding Valiant?

Spike leapt on the demon's back and wrapped an arm around its neck. "Shoot me now," he growled to Alex, "and I'll feed you face-first to this eyesore if it's the last thing I bloody do." Self-righteous git, he added mentally, as he was bucked off to land ten feet away, on his back, to look briefly at the stars. He sat up game-faced with irritation just as Buffy skidded into sight and twirled out a fierce side-kick to the demon's unprotected flank. It whipped its tail around and she rose off the ground, knees tucked like a schoolgirl playing skip-robe, letting it sweep under her.

For a half-second Spike was filled to distraction with mad love, then he shoved himself off his elbows, grabbed a fallen tree branch, and charged back into battle. He whacked the thing as Buffy punched, while in the background Red manifested stingers that buried themselves in the creature's flesh. Alex yanked out a tiny stick that gave Spike pause to smirk (nearly resulting in a nasty case of headlessness), until the demon hunter snapped it out to its full length and revealed a handy six-foot pole with a pointy bit on the end. He began stabbing at the demon, aiming for the heart.

"Hey, watch it!" Spike warned, as the pointy end passed the demon and flicked in his direction, but a moment later he was caught up again in the fight, anger dissolving into the heat of violence. He loved to dance, even with things this nasty. In his head a soundtrack of rage thrashed, in his veins blood hummed again. He'd lived a hundred odd years, and when he fought, he could feel his life
race by in a flickering reel of his own motion or a train in the darkness, carrying him from then to now, from the moment his teeth first extended to scythe down into a girl's neck, to this moment's wild leaping kick against leathery skin, and everything in between, the electric lights and the flappers and stupid soldiers, Dru's white scarf flying in the wind as they drove a stolen car across France, the ocean waves at night and the palm trees and Mardi Gras cries, and the New York skyline as it grew taller and brighter in a wild fast-motion blur, and Casablanca and the Eiffel tower and every drunken fight, every neck broken, every tinkling piano song, some of which he'd played, and the rude bright-haired punks he'd arse-fucked in grimy alleys and sometimes let go, nihilists released back into the night, fish cut free from the hook. All of it delivered in kick after brilliant kick until he remembered that he was--until he forgot that he wasn't--

And Alex sank his weapon into the demon's heart and it roared and fell, and Spike watched, deflating along with it, enthralled by its ugliness, unredeemed by any grace, until it died there on the grass by his bare feet.

"Whoo," said Willow, and sucked on her magic-burnt fingers. The tip of one was still alight, but she blew it out like a birthday cake candle and grinned at him, a witch with wild red hair. Spike, faintly dazed in the aftermath, just stared back at her, trying to reconcile this sudden cheerfulness with the mood she'd inflicted on him these past weeks. But even as he watched, her light faded. She was remembering him again, he could see it happening. Was remembering whatever it was about him she'd briefly forgotten.

Spike felt...he felt something. And he wondered if he wanted to put a name to it.

I'm not a man, he thought--and felt his whole raging life, his glorious century, pinwheel through him and give the lie to that. He could feel like a man. It only took remembering how.

And he could feel like a monster. With one look his mirror.

"Maybe we should chop it up," Buffy was saying doubtfully, staring down at the dead thing in the grass. "Make it more portable...for disposal. Oh, forget it." She sighed and lifted her gaze, then spotted Foss's body with its sightless eyes and twisted neck. "What," she gasped, looking to Spike, to Alex. "How?" Her anger was massing, Spike could feel it. Knew the warning signs, the clenched hands, the stiff stance. The guilt and horror threatening to surface in her eyes made it worse.

"Mister Clever-Pants here paid me a visit," Spike said, making sure to get the first word in. No way he was going to be chaff to the Buffy storm. "Thought he'd kill me and liberate our prisoner. Managed the latter." He gave Alex a heavily lidded look of dislike, not even bothering to sneer. "Managed to get the bloke killed too," he added, in case that wasn't obvious.

Alex wiped a smear of green blood from his cheek with the back of one hand, the drag of his knuckles mixing his own red blood with it. "I was saving him," he grit out, speaking wholly to Buffy, dark eyes fixed on her. "From you, and from this." He spat at Spike's feet.

"Are you crazy?" she asked. "He was spying on me, and had some plan to do I-don't-know-what to the water supply, and maybe to take over the town. And know I may never know what until it's too late because you dragged him out here to be demon food." She'd stepped up to him as if ready to bump chests, a fury, tiny, blonde and terrible, and if Alex here was as smart as he dressed, he'd be quaking in his shiny loafers about now.

Alex didn't flinch. "He was demon food if I left him. I heard what you had planned, and I heard him." A sharp wave in Spike's direction. "Your Angel isn't such a noble beast after all. Oh, I'm sure that you try to justify it by feeding him criminals rather than innocents. I can't believe it salves your conscience for very long, though."
"God, are you listening?" railed Buffy. "We wanted to question Foss. I brought Willow here to work a truth spell. That's all. Spi--Angel was just playing the heavy."

In response, Alex smiled. "He isn't even Angel, is he."

Buffy glanced at Spike, and Spike's guts tightened at the brief flash of regret in her eyes, as if that accusation had been a bow briefly laid to violin: cue heart-strings, cue pang of what might have been. They were all looking at him--Buffy, Alex, Willow. And he realized with a lurch of shock that he was still in game face; and though it was his shield, the source of power coursing through him, for a moment it felt filthy to Spike, a private part of him exposed, as if he had his willy hanging out and gave a shit that he did.

"He's not Angel," Buffy said, turning back to face Alex. "I knew if I told you anything else, you'd kill him. But it doesn't make any difference who he is. You still--"

"You know, Slayer. You don't get to do that. Not with me." Alex lit a cigarette, then began wrapping his bleeding hand with a handkerchief as he spoke. "You've enjoyed telling me how to play by the rules. I find that you aren't playing by your own. Enough said, don't you think?" He took a drag on his cigarette. "You have an interesting psychodrama here, but I've done what I came to do."

He was angry, noted Spike. Curious, that. Angry and maybe even injured, not in a bodily way but still visible in how his hand trembled and his face worked under the skin. Poor boy thought he'd had his illusions shattered. And maybe he had.

"I wouldn't mind making a few more kills before I go, of course," Alex let his cigarette drop to smolder on the ground. "But I'm willing to call this stalemate."

"Oh, that's big of you," said Buffy. "Leave your corpses for us to clean up and drive off into the sunrise to collect your check."

"Speaking of which, I'll send you a commission for your efforts. I think half is fair."

"Don't bother."

Hello, thought Spike in annoyance. Not as if they couldn't dine out on the proceeds. Or keep the Niblet in sparkly nail polish for a few weeks. He really didn't get her sometimes. Except that an instant later he did. He could feel his own pride stirring reluctantly, a sluggish thing yanking its head out of the muck where Spike tried to keep it penned. A useless thing, pride, that kept you from taking perfectly good hand-outs from wankers you loathed.

"I'll be going then." He nodded to Willow but didn't spare a glance at Spike before turning and walking off. He skirted Foss's corpse, his retreating shoulders rigid, and then wove away into the trees and tombstones.

"Damn it," said Buffy. She stared across the grass, and her face took on the little-girl-lost aspect which always wrenched at Spike's heart.

His own face felt frozen, but he forced himself to devamp, and looked at Willow. She met his eyes steadily, and he met hers meaningfully. "Look," he said. "Why don't you two run along. I'll clear up here."

Willow moved to take Buffy's arm, but Buffy remained rooted in place. "Last time you tried to get rid of a body...remind me how that turned out." Her words might have been callous, a taunt, if her tone hadn't been so dull.
Spike flinched inwardly even so, but didn't show it except by a tightness of jaw she didn't see, because she wasn't looking at him. "Aberration, that. Interference, probably. I've a century's practice getting rid of the evidence, love. This one won't surface." Damn well right it wouldn't. Because he was going to drag it deep underground and pitch it down a crevasse.

And now she did look at him. "I'm the kind of person who gets rid of bodies now." Tears were brimming, her mouth spasming in an attempt at cocksure irony. "I've come a long way."

"No," Spike said sharply, stepping close to loom over her. "I'm the sort gets rid of bodies. You--you'll never be that sort. So just let me do what I'm made for." He would have taken her arms, tried to be tender, but he intuited she wouldn't want a Hallmark moment, what with a human mortifying on the grass.

"Come on, Buffy." Willow tugged at her arm. Spike waited for the usual platitudes: there's nothing we could have done, it's no one's fault. But Red offered no more than her touch. He thought that of all the Scoobies, the witch had grown the hardest, the most cynical, though she usually tried to hide it. He couldn't say he didn't appreciate it now.

They walked off, Willow's arm around her shoulders. Spike's gaze followed them until he lost sight of blonde hair in moonlight, its gold swallowed by shadows. Then he sighed and rolled up his sleeves and played undertaker.

In smaller hours, in small rooms....

"This is unfortunate," said Clude, pacing the apartment nervously. "Nilec will not be pleased." He glanced at the rondure on the coffee table, clearly dreading the imperative glow it would soon emit.

Lalethki rubbed his dyspeptic stomach, swigged some bismuth, and grunted. "Working with humans. What did I tell you--"

"Spare me." Clude sat down heavily across from him, leaning forward to rest head in hands. "Every cell must have a human," he said tiredly. "They are useful and will have their place in the new order."

The rondure's glow filled the darkened room, its mists flickering ominously before parting to reveal Nilec's cold stare. Lalethki and Clude rose and saluted, then sat back down.

"Report," said the general succinctly, before sliding between his thin lips what appeared to be a roasted mouse on a skewer. Officers were certainly well-fed on delicacies, thought Lalethki. It must be nice.

As the general's teeth ground, Clude picked up a thick binder from beside him on the couch. "Sir, before we begin with reports from the cells, there is a piece of unhappy news I must impart." He took a deep breath. "Avery Foss has gone missing. We think the slayer has taken him. Our surveillance camera caught footage of her following him into one of our offices with a male accomplice, and then accosting him afterwards. There was an attack by a Phadean demon which allowed Foss to escape, but since then he has not reported in."
"Sloppy work, Lieutenant."

"Sir," acknowledged Clude with a bowed head.

"Another tray of mice," the general mused aphoristically, or so it sounded to Lalethki, until he realized Nilec was addressing a servant. He nibbled a crackled tail. "Make sure this does not compromise your position."

"Of course, sir," Clude said fervently. "I mean, of course not. We will take immediate steps to counter any breach of security that could interfere with our efforts, or with the rise of the New Reich."

Nilec's lips curved in a faint smile that sent wrinkles fanning across his cheeks. "Nothing can deter the rise of the New Reich, Lieutenant. The era of humanity's dominance over the earth is coming to a close, and its rightful owners will resume their primacy and walk freely across its lands. Our time is near."

"Our time is near," Clude and Lalethki echoed, exchanging a glance.

"Er, how near, sir?" Lalethki asked, raising one hand. "We haven't been told--"

"And now you see why," Nilec snarled, his face abruptly filling the rondure with fish-eyed rage. "You receive only the information you need, no more."

"Sir." Lalethki swallowed, lowering his eyes.

Face clearing, Nilec leaned back in his unseen chair and steepled his hands together. "But hold steady, men. You are doing an important job, sowing the seeds for the harvest to come. When our readiness is at hand, you'll receive the call. And you will not have much longer to wait. So come," he picked up another skewered mouse and held it consideringly, "tell me first--how long until the water supply is prepared?"

The End

Chapter End Notes

I'm grateful to everyone who has sent me feedback so far. It makes me happy.
It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
Previously on Buffy...there's a little bit of Willow backstory shuffled in this time, pretty much left unexplained, imagined to tie in with virtual eps in late season six, and in season seven.

This falls approximately around Oct 23, 2003.

The title is from "As Time Goes By."

The dream began with familiar steps, but it didn't help to know she was dreaming. And by the time she opened the front door of her house, she forgot she was.

The door is my door, and when I open it as I always do, I don't need a key. And I drop my jacket and say, Hey, mom. Walk into the living room, and mom is there on the couch, tired, looking at me. Dying. Her skirt up in that familiar way, her legs crooked, eyes wide and blank, like a doll's. But she sees me. Spike kneels next to her saying, Joyce, Joyce!, holding her hand in rough desperation, while Angel stands awkwardly off in the corner, hands in pockets, watching.

We form a triangle: Angel watching Spike and my mother, my mother watching me, me watching everything. I walk to the kitchen to call 911 so they can help Angel get rid of the body. Once I get there, though, I realize how pointless it is to call. I go to the Bronze instead, with Spike. But when we dance, I'm Drusilla, my arms long and white, winding around his neck. I can't see my own face, but I know this is who I am, and then I catch fractured sight of myself in the mirrors to confirm it: Drusilla and Buffy, Buffy and Drusilla, with Faith laughing at me from somewhere.

Bitch, I think.

And I leave, go outside to get a drink in the cool air and to kill something that needs killing. It's always night here and as I catch up to the figure striding away and touch its shoulder, it whirls and Willow is a vampire. We talk and I'm terrified, ready to slay her if she attacks, but she doesn't. I sense that she's sad. She misses school.

"What do you have against Spike?" I ask flatly.

"Nothing," she says. "He's a good guy."

I tell her to stop being ironic, even though she wasn't.

"It's going to snow," Willow says.
And I look up. And feel the imminence of snow.

Buffy's eyes snapped open, and she rolled to look at the clock, thinking in the muddled way of dreams that it would tell her the weather. She was expecting snow. But the sun shone brightly through the windows, and when she sat up and looked outside, the tree branches were bare. Like unmelted snowflakes, pieces of her dream still clung to her mind.

Not with the prophetic previews again, she thought. But she'd come to recognize the difference between the reheated leftovers of her psyche and the really important stuff. A different flavor, if you wanted to call it that. This had the flavor of badness. She pulled her diary from her bedside drawer, its pages unbroken for months, and jotted down her dream. When her pen stopped moving several minutes later, she re-read her words slowly, but couldn't make any sense of the dream's significance. Except that she needed to ask Willow what her current gripe against Spike was. That part was nicely literal.

Buffy closed the diary and held it in her lap as waking thoughts stirred in with sleep thoughts, of how she missed her mom, of how she'd have to get up today and find something to wear, fix her face in the mirror, and then go to the Magic Box, where the retail hours would drag, measured by the movement of shadows across the floor, until late afternoon, when Spike would come and they'd train together. Evenings were more comfortable, and nights--dinner, Dawn, and demons. The three D's. And night brought the chance to relax sometimes, to hang with friends and see Spike in a way that didn't involve bloodshed. Much. She understood the world after the sun went down. Fit into that world, and even ruled it. Days though, when Willow and Tara and Dawn did their school thing, and Xander and Anya worked at jobs they actually, weirdly enjoyed--days, Buffy could do without.

A small, mean part of her looked at the hours ahead and sighed and grumbled: it's too much. It was the part of her that wanted to be taken care of. And if her life wasn't going to be normal--which by now almost seemed a silly girl's wish--then why couldn't it at least be arranged for her convenience? She was the chosen one, the slayer. Why didn't the Watchers Council house her, feed her, clothe her? Hell, pay her? If her work was slaying, and it was oh so important, then why did she have a crap job shelving and selling dried rodents to New Age warlock wannabes? In a fair world, she shouldn't have to do anything but fight, and sleep well, and fight again. Until it was time for the nice retirement home.

But in her bank account was money from Giles that couldn't be called rightfully hers, and Buffy felt her grievances dissipate, leaving the unfair but more complex world of reality and what she knew to be her bedrock ingratitude. God, she missed Giles. Almost as much as her mom. There had been times during the last few years she'd felt so distant from him, it was like they'd never been close at all. But other times she'd look at her life, realize that the only people in sight were a handful of peers just recently legal, a kid sister, and a vampire who pre-dated the automobile but had no more moral sense than a Lost Boy, and she'd find herself longing for Giles--stable, adult, paternal--so keenly she thought it might tear her heart out.

I'm over my rebellious teen phase, Buffy promised, winging her thoughts out to him through the ether. You can come back now, okay?
And she stared out her window restlessly, at a bright California day without snow.

Coming down the stairs, Buffy could hear voices from the kitchen, high-pitched, threaded with teen laughter. A dish clattered.

"Ed thinks he's the ship 'cause he's got his own place," she heard. The ship? Oh, wait. "But he's just a pissant with a future in polyester. He'll still be wearing a Doublemeat cow on his head when he's forty."

Buffy raised her brows as she headed toward the kitchen. This prediction struck her as remarkably arrogant coming from someone whose own employment skills were suitable to hooking, topless dancing, and...well, hooking came to mind again.

"Good morning," Buffy said, and at her entrance Kerry twirled lazily on her stool and smirked a greeting.

"Morning, big sistah."

I'm not your sister, Buffy thought. But if I were I'd rip that bolt right out of your tongue, and wash your skanky hair, and good God, what--

"What happened to your cheek? Were you in an accident?" She flashed a sharp look at Dawn, who was dumping cereal into a bowl. Trying to curb her suspicions was difficult, but there was no flinch, and no guilt on Dawn's thankfully unmarked face.

Kerry shifted on her stool, legs wrapping around the rungs, big knees poking through black tights which laddered down to incongruously expensive shoes. "Stitched," she said, fingering the fluorescent orange lacing in her cheek with a look of dope-eyed satisfaction. Her nails were tipped in red, just the tips. "It's all the fury right now. Very Frankenstein, isn't it?"

Wow, that was disgusting. "For lack of another word I can't say aloud right now." Aware she was being fuddy and perhaps duddy, Buffy still heard herself ask: "Aren't you worried about scars?"

The girl laughed and Buffy couldn't look away as her pink, gold-studded tongue flashed behind white teeth. Her red-shadowed eyes crinkled, her hair snarled, and the rest of her young, lanky body seemed to be laughing too as it twisted energetically on the stool. And oh hey, look, Buffy thought, spotting cigarettes in Kerry's open bag; what a great peer model for Dawn.

Of course, when it came to role models, what did she have to offer? A twice-dead slayer sister, check. Unsouled vampire, check. Lesbian witches, check. And an ex-vengeance demon, who at least had a strong work ethic and a heart for fidelity.

It occurred to Buffy that she really should invite Xander over more often.

"Let's motor," Kerry said to Dawn, drawing her bag shut and pulling it onto her shoulders. She hopped to her feet. Not a tall girl, not as tough as her exterior would make you think. But Dawn said she knew some judo and carried pepper spray, so she could probably take care of herself pretty well; and in this town, survival skills were everything. Maybe not such a bad peer model, after all,
Buffy allowed. Even if she did dress like a crack-alley ho.

"Did you both eat?" She looked at the cereal bowl, still dry of milk, from which Dawn had been picking. "I could make some eggs."

"I'm full," said Dawn, pulling on her own backpack. Her long hair swung forward as she ducked her head, and for a moment Buffy's gaze settled on her with aching tenderness. Kerry was already at the door, Dawn moving to follow with a casual, "See ya." Not so different from any other morning, but on the Hellmouth, any day could be the last.

"Dawn, hold on." Buffy moved to her sister's side, ignoring her tightly wound impatience and Kerry's brazen-eyed regard. "She'll be out in a minute," she told Kerry. When they were alone, she stroked back Dawn's hair. A gesture of habit meeting affection.

"What?" said Dawn, and Buffy could hear her edginess now and maybe even the guilt she'd searched for earlier. Teens always had guilt, though. This scene mirrored a thousand she'd played out with mom, in both her pre and post-slayer days. She could imagine endless secrets lurking behind her sister's clear, smooth face, and those guileless eyes. But paranoia is a silent killer, she reminded herself. Almost as bad for your heart as premature vampage.

Almost.

"I just wanted one of those sister moments."

"Can we have it tonight?" Dawn gripped the straps of her backpack. "We're running late and I want to study for a quiz before school starts."

"Actually--not tonight, but this weekend--how do you feel about a shopping spree?"

Dawn hesitated, thoughts visibly working, as if she had more than one option to weigh. "Well, I usually feel pretty good about spending money," she admitted at last.

Buffy nodded. Blood of my blood. "I've been thinking it's time to remodel our rooms. Out with the old, in with the new. Wallpaper, furniture, the works. We can get Xander to help with all the non-chick stuff."

Interest lit Dawn's face, like sun behind a drawn curtain. "Yeah? All right. You're really old-fashioned, though. You know that, right? There's no such thing as non-chick stuff. And you the slayer."

"I cling to my femininity," said Buffy, drawing herself up slightly. "Wood. Hammers. Things of the men. But you're right, there's no such thing as non-chick stuff. You could be anything you want to be." A pang gripped her unexpectedly and she echoed her sister's words: "You know that, right?"

"Duh."

A car horn honked, and Dawn's hand moved to push open the door.

"Dawn."

"What?" Impatience was back fiercer than ever, caught in the curve of her sister's head and in her opaque eyes. A jittering freeze-frame.

"I just." She took a breath, let it out. "Nothing. Except--" Her sister halted again, groaning, and Buffy spoke in a rush: "Don't get your tongue pierced or your cheek stitched or start smoking. And
good luck on your quiz."

Dawn, who'd frozen briefly in place to stare at her, broke to nod. "If I have time to study," she retorted pointedly.

"Go."

With that permission, Dawn fled. And Buffy stepped up to the kitchen door and watched her dash down the steps, around the yard, to wherever the waiting car idled. Out of sight.

She sighed.

Kids of my own, she thought, imagining toddlers, little girls with lunchboxes and pigtails.

Funny. She still wanted them.

"Kids?" said Xander, looking over at Anya as he drove. He knew he sounded like the typical male, startled as a rabbit--no, not rabbit--startled as a deer in headlights, and wait, what did a startled deer sound like, scratch that, and hell, he was panicking, yes, yes, yes.

The streets rolled by, morning sunlight pouring into the truck like butter melting in the air. Anya was serenely staring out the front window, eyelids still heavily furled from sleep or sex, curls soft and tousled, skin gold in the brilliant sunlight, as if kissed by god; and god, she was beautiful, roses and sunlight and sunlight again. Not her normal wide-eyed self, though, not this morning. Bright eyes, but no bushy tail. Bushy tail. Pretty dirty phrase when you stopped to think about it, and Xander did, desperate to divert himself as she continued talking. But wait, he had to track this with care. Pay attention. Far too dangerous to let her drive the conversation alone. She might read his silence as consent. He'd learned that lesson too well before. What the hell was she saying?

"...time in our lives when we need to think about making a family. We're twenty-three now, and when we're forty-six--each of us, I mean, not together--our child would be twenty-three. More or less. We'd have someone to take care of us in our dotage."

"Our what?"

"Our old age. When we're no longer wage-earners. Assuming we raise the child well and provide for it, it would have to take care of us. It wouldn't just leave us on the hillside to die. That's just not done anymore."

"Anya. Do you mind not calling our unborn child 'it'? Assign it a gender. Use your imagination. Otherwise I use mine and come up with...." He trailed off, unable to complete the thought, but she completed it for him.

"I'm genetically human," she said. "I've told you that. It's not like you have to worry about horns or hooves."

"I only worry about horns and hooves when you say 'horns and hooves,'" he noted. Otherwise, he just worried about strange spots and spikes and tails.
"Anyway, I never had hooves."

Xander stopped at a light, hands tight on the steering wheel. Sun. Bright.

"I'd be a good mother, I think." She paused. "I've been reading books." He closed his eyes. No. Not the books. "Mister Spock, for instance, says not to be overawed by experts--to trust your instincts. I have those. Instincts."

He turned his head, cocked it assertively. "I think you mean Doctor Spock," he said, latching immediately onto geekish pedantry. "Doctor, not Mister. Mister Spock is from Star Trek, the original series, and you're winding me up, aren't you." Amazement struck him, buoyed his voice. How far she had come.

She smiled, gazing out the window, not even looking at him, content in her inner world. "I like to wind you up. You make such a pleasant humming noise."

Oh man, thought Xander. Man, oh man, I love her. And maybe it wasn't normal to love a pin-up girl with too much history, with precise speech and a purse full of dingbat notions, but he did, because she made everything predictable fresh and surprising, even herself. It was craziness. Big craziness and horns honking at him. Xander put the truck into gear, drove again, his thoughts whirling. "Anya. I know it's the done thing, the mammal thing. Having a kid. But--"

"You're going to say you're not ready," she interrupted without ire. Where was all her ire? Some heat would be reassuring, some sound and fury. Not this strange calm. "You're a man. Settling down isn't in your biology."

"I was ready to settle down," he reminded her, almost sharply. "I'm not the one who called off the wedding."

"I can't marry you under a curse, Xander."

He pulled in front of the Magic Box, turned off the truck. And shit, he thought, looking over at Anya; he'd hurt her, upset her. That trembling edge in her voice was matched by a frown. "I know that," he reassured her. "I didn't mean--"

"Our child would be illegitimate. But I'm willing to risk any stigma. Because it--he--would be ours. Something we'd made. You and I, both adding ingredients. Like a casserole, but better. A living casserole, with little fingers and tiny toes." She turned in the seat, eyes widened to normal intensity, piercing him through.

"And that's...beautiful, Anya," he said, meaning it. He took her hand. "But, you know, forty-six isn't old. Not in this shiny new millennium. And we have at least seven more years to make a baby in a normal way, no risks, and--"

"And you could die tomorrow."

Xander managed a laugh. "Die? Me? Me no die." Her hand was cool and slim in his, a soft little girl paw. And looking at her, he was with her, one hundred percent. A man and his mate, star and starlet, the two of them made for the big screen. He liked her secret sense of humor, which she entrusted only to him. Liked that trust, and everything else. Her legs. Her wicked eyes. The things she did for him and with him. How she sat on the bed, naked, eating cookies, with perfect composure. Her dismissive contempt for things everyone commonly treasured: puppies, kites, pretty blue lakes; and her adoration of things no one else in his world appreciated: capped beer steins, frilly aprons with pockets, the genius of Bruce Campbell. They matched like a salt and a
pepper shaker, a novelty item, despite every natural law that said they shouldn't. She was a squirrelly, lovely woman in twenty-three year old genes; and he was a guy who still wasn't used to feeling happy.

"You promise me that," she said. "But you can't really. Promise me that."

Death. They were talking about death. Even here in the sunshine, parked on a public street as a new day began, the shadow of mortality lay over them. Welcome to Sunnydale.

"I can try." It was an attempt at a joke, almost. A lame one.

Anya gazed at him, face unmoving, reproachful. But even more sad than reproachful. And the sadness was harder for Xander to bear.

"Anya."

"I have to prepare the store now."

"Anya--"

"You have a good day, honey."

"An!"

But the truck door had closed behind her, and she was moving away across the sidewalk. Sidewalk to shopfront, her hand twisting the key in the lock before she disappeared inside, and then that door closed too. It was the moment when the girl leaves the guy as he's calling after her, when something has gone wrong between them, when you shove more popcorn in your mouth and try to stay awake, feeling jaded and unmoved. Because you know things will turn out okay by the end of the flick. The crazy kids always make up, problems solved in kisses and decisions.

Except this was the life of Xander Harris. It never seemed to proceed according to formula; it wasn't a crowd pleaser. And he wasn't sure how it ended.

Hell, he wasn't even sure of the next scene.

As the truck pulled away into traffic, the sidewalk was left deserted. Cars passed each other on the street, and across the street, a woman window-shopped in the early morning. In the window were chic dresses, worn by mannequins whose fingers had frozen in gestures of alarm. Over the red-tiled roof of the store, across the tree-tops, the sun rose, shining down on a nearby park in which children played, their mothers and nannies gathering on benches to watch for injuries and perverts and anything that might blot the serene landscape. Children swung dizzily on the swings and slid on the slides, while slender au pairs laughed and a dog raced to catch a frisbee, thrown by a young man in blue jeans and a UC Sunnydale sweat shirt.

Buffy walked along the street, past the park, her gaze dropping from the blue sky to the scrolled fence behind which children played safely. Their shrieks of laughter echoed and rang in her ears, bouncing off the jungle gyms and snake slides as their bodies did. She smiled, pace slowing. She
didn't have to get to work yet, and there was a little boy behind the fence up ahead. Short little guy, stocky as his dad must be, soft brown hair. His back was to her, and he was playing with a ball. Squatting to pick it up, tossing it once, then placing it back on the ground. Repeat. Buffy's lips quirked in indulgence at the childish logic behind the game.

She didn't see any sign of mom around, and the women on the benches were yards away and watching in the other direction. It kind of bothered her, even though there was a fair stretch of fence and no real danger to the kid.

"Hey," she called. The boy put the ball down, straightened, then squatted again to pick it up in his chubby hands. "Where's your mom?"

The boy tossed the ball, caught it, set it carefully back down.

"Hey," Buffy said, stopping at the fence, her hands closing around the bars. She could only see the back of his head and fine straight hair, some strands messily overlapping others. "You all alone? Where's your doggie? I can't see her."

The child held the ball in his hands and turned, his golden eyes flaring vacantly at her, his grey, bumpy face set in a monster's stiff regard. Buffy, he said.

_Buffy_. His mouth moved again, strange and wide.

"Buffy!"

Buffy jerked awake, heart lurching. "No," she said. Her eyes slowly focused on Anya. "What?" She looked around the shop, confused.

"You fell asleep." Anya's voice was marble-hard and irritated. "You're drooling on the invoices."

Buffy straightened and wiped the wrinkled papers off, embarrassed. "Sorry." Her hands felt big and clumsy, her dream an encasing skin of strangeness that hadn't yet thawed.

"I asked you to watch the shop while I was downstairs. You said you would. A gang of ruffians could have walked in while you were asleep and carted off half the store." She waved a hand, sweeping it like a display model's to encompass the nearby Meadowe Arts rack. Buffy pictured hard-core gangbangers sneaking in to steal the potpourri sachets and filigree earrings.

"Why are you smiling?" asked Anya, even more sharply. "You think that would be funny? Some of this month's merchandise hasn't even been paid for yet."

Anya's anger wasn't misplaced, Buffy reminded herself. "I'm sorry," she said. "I wasn't smiling at--I won't fall asleep again. Look." She made her eyes big. "Very awake. A few cups of high-test and I'll be charged and good for the rest of the shift."

"I should really do a full inventory." Anya stared at the shelves, rigid with anxiety. "Who knows what's missing. Anyone could have been here."

Buffy was beginning to feel defensive. "I think I would have heard the door."

"Oh yes. Slayer reflexes. Like a dog at a bell, you'd scent danger, right? You'd salivate? That's what you were doing on my invoices. Salivating." Her voice was growing tighter, higher, a spring coiling and ready to snap.

"Anya!" Annoyed and faintly alarmed, Buffy felt her guilt evaporating. "Chill, okay?"
Anya didn't press her attack. Her shoulders suddenly drooped, and she rested her hands on the counter. "I'm sorry," she said more quietly.

"Are you okay?" Buffy leaned forward. She and Anya weren't best buds, but working together, while stressful, did form a bond. She liked and respected Anya, even when they were annoying each other. If their lives hadn't been interwoven together in other ways, it was true that Buffy probably would never have worked at the Magic Box, or made any effort at friendship with someone so different and difficult. But their lives were entwined, like family. The challenging kind of family, where you couldn't simply fall back on blood, but had to choose and then stand by your choices.

"No, I'm not okay. I want--" And then Anya hesitated, gaze dropping in a frown, lips parted on soft silence as if she were rethinking her words. That didn't happen very often. She met Buffy's eyes and gave a tight smile. "I want a lot of things. But I don't want to talk about them now. Finish up those invoices." She used her boss voice, casual and direct, then added a punctilious "Please," before looking away; withdrawing into herself. "I'm going to check yesterday's delivery to make sure they didn't short us on the Thavardian crystals again."

"Okay." Buffy watched her walk away, feeling unsettled without knowing quite why. Except that Anya should be forever Anya, a natural law, immutable. Moody, yes. At a loss for words, no. It was like seeing a river run dry. A clock run backwards.

Wrongness. Like a child hiding a monster. She pushed her hair back off her face, disquieted as she remembered her dream. In her mind's eye she saw the boy at the fence turning to her, skin a mottled mask, eyes drained of humanity. The ventilation in the shop switched on and hummed to life, and Buffy looked up, across the empty floor. She felt as if someone were about to walk in, but no one jingled the bell. Alone with her worries, she began re-totaling the invoices, burying herself in the job until the phone on the counter rang.

"Magic Box," she said.

"Buffy."

She straightened, the afternoon brightening as if the angle of the sun had just changed, breaking through a window. "Giles! I was just thinking of you this morning in bed."

There was an acute, very British pause.

"Actually," said Buffy, "we could probably just leave 'in bed' off that particular fortune cookie."

"Quite." Giles cleared his throat. "How are you?" The question was like the opening chord of a well-known song.

"I'm--" Living the lie, confused, dreaming, morally adrift, missing you like crazy, twenty-two and living on the Hellmouth and so incredibly tired. "I'm me." So very, very me.

"So you are. That's good to hear. And not merely as a rhetorical statement, either."

"Why?" Buffy frowned. "Who else would I be?"

"Oh," said Giles. "No. I simply meant that, er, considering the source. And really, Buffy, you should be glad to be you. Who you, you are. I mean, well--the ordinary can be quite blessedly ordinary at times, and normalcy a boon--"

"Giles, are you okay?" Buffy asked, interrupting his blithering.
"What? Ah, yes." The sound of Giles catching himself. "I'm fine, thank you."

"Uh-huh." Skepticism infused her voice.

"I simply forget," he said more gently, like a breath of warmth in her ear; and she could picture his smile, the crinkling of his face. Wanted to picture the room behind him: books on the shelves, a decanter, a jacket slung over the back of a chair. Couldn't quite do it, though. She'd only ever seen his apartment here; that snapshot was permanent, no matter where he lived now.

"Forget what?"

"Oh," he said, a rich, rolling sound, backed with something almost a laugh. "That our lives have diverged. That my...adventures aren't yours. We've never truly shared a common language, and now we lack even the context to make translations."

The blunt, casual words shocked Buffy, and hurt; she thought of how she'd wished this morning for Giles to be back in her life, the token adult, a voice of sanity. But was this how adults talked to each other? Was it supposed to be sophisticated, this unvarnished truth? She imagined Giles at British cocktail parties, where everyone was over thirty and truth was passed around like dry, crisp crackers or a bitter wine. For one moment his reticence had fallen, and the slip made her see how carefully he must guard his words with her the rest of the time. She supposed it proved his point.

"Buffy, are you there?"

"I'm here," she said quietly, her hand clenched around the phone so tight she heard the plastic creak. She forced herself to relax. If she broke the phone, Anya would make her pay for it.

"Ah." A pause, as if he were reassessing the conversation. "Well, I called to find out whether any progress had been made on the Naciran prophecy. I haven't heard from Willow in quite some time--she hasn't replied to my e-mails. I would have been worried, if Anya hadn't assured me that you were all in good health."

"She hasn't written?" Puzzled, Buffy picked up a pencil and tapped it against the counter fast and hard. "I thought she was consulting you on this." She tried to remember what Willow had said, the exact words used whenever Buffy had asked how it was going.

"Me? No. I haven't been in contact since sending the additional texts she requested. That was weeks ago. Perhaps I should have followed up sooner but things have been, er...busy here."

"Adventures?" Buffy half-smiled, hearing the irony in his choice of words.

"Quite."

"We're supposed to have a war meeting this evening," she said. "Brainstorm, round table, that kind of thing. Oh, did she--well, I guess she didn't tell you, but we have a notebook."

"A notebook?" Giles's voice was politely confused.

"Yeah, we took it off this lurky guy who'd been following me. At least, he kept showing up in the same places I did. It's in some demon language, probably a code."

"I--I'm sorry. What does this have to do with--"

Buffy grimaced and bounced on her stool, impatient at herself: "Wait, I can tell this better. So this prophecy: darkness rising, right? Well, these strange guys in fedoras are running around town--"
demons and humans." She waved a hand he couldn't see. "Dogs and cats, living together, yadda yadda. And they're planning something with the town water supply, and talking about a 'New Reich', which you have to admit sounds pretty nasty. We've been testing the water--I mean, in a literal sense--but so far nothing. I grabbed one of these guys and got his notebook, and we were going to question him, but then he met up with a demon and after that he wasn't saying anything."

She thought about sharing the dreams, but didn't. No reason to. He couldn't tell her anything she didn't already know.

"I see. Except for the part about dogs and cats." A pause. "'New Reich', you say." She could see his glasses being drawn off in dim lamplight, imagine him squinting across the room at his bookshelves. "That's a phrase I've never heard before. I wonder...."

"This guy Foss--the dead one--we searched his apartment but came up empty. And we went back to the office where we'd found him, but it had been cleared out." And hadn't that been a kick in the teeth, showing up the next night for a little self-congratulatory Watergating only to find out they were too late.

"Pity." Shifting sounds traveled to Buffy from his end of the line. "I'll ask around, see if I can find out anything about this 'New Reich.' Certainly if anyone has heard such a phrase, it would tend to stick in the mind."

"Good," said Buffy. "Let's hope it's sticky."

"Yes...any other news?"

What could she say to that. Weeks of her so-called life blurred through her mind like scenes from a music video, sped up, fragments impossible to stitch together into a coherent narrative. It was either tell him everything, or nothing at all. "No common language," she murmured.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. The usual. Demons, vamps, wild partying."

"Speaking of vampires...how is Spike?"

"How is he?" Buffy boggled, deliberately moved the phone away from her ear, shook it like a recalcitrant ball-point and moved it back. "Say that again?"

"I was just wondering if he's been bothering you."

"Oh. Right."

"Because if he is, Buffy, you mustn't hesitate to tell me. I can be on the next plane. I know you and he share a history--well, we all share a history with Spike. But my own is less colored by sentiment. Or, forgive me, gratitude might be a better word. And you have every reason to be grateful. I don't deny his past usefulness. But I have no compunction against dealing with Spike in a permanent way, should it become necessary."

Her throat worked, oddly tight. "He's not bothering me."

Giles treated her to his very special brand of silence--a silence made significant by reflective glass and hard, blue eyes and a set mouth, all conjured merely in her memory--before saying, "Very well."
"Giles...I...I miss you." The words stumbled out, half-choked and unexpected.

"And I you." The phone line was so preternaturally clear that she could hear him swallowing, a click of throat. "I'm always here for you, Buffy. Always." A momentary harshness of emotion sent shivers down her spine. "You know that, don't you?"

Buffy nodded. Another gesture he couldn't see, an expression he couldn't read. He was wrong, though. They did share a language, even if it had no words. If she could see his face captured in memory, so easily it was as if he stood in front of her...surely he could see hers.

"I know," she said.

When Buffy began descending into the basement, she moved instinctively to flick on the lights, then realized it was unnecessary. Somewhere down there a lamp was already on, casting its glow across the display stands and tumbled cartons. She stepped carefully down the treads, empty boxes in hand, and dropped them with a sigh at the foot of the stairs.

"What have we here," came a soft voice from the corner. "A pretty young shopgirl, about on her errands." A footstep snapped with precision across the cement floor, then another. His familiar tread, boot-heavy, deliberately breaking the silence and solitude. "Innocent as sunshine. Sun the color of her fair, fine braids." And his white hand ghosted her hair, then crossed her face, fingers curling outward like the legs of a dead spider as he brushed the back of his hand down her cheek. Innocent? No. She was not at all innocent in wanting him.

"You know Anya doesn't like you smoking down here." She could barely hear her own voice, it was so soft. His cigarette smoke was swirling around them, acrid and grey.

He leaned in, head tilting as if to feed, and it was...it was almost humiliating, her flood of desire as she opened her mouth to his greeting kiss. His own mouth bitter, soft. He tasted of blood, had been drinking recently. She'd fought him many times; in the waxed, dark hallway of her high school she'd first met him in battle, and now here he was kissing her as if they'd always been fated for this. He was dropping his cigarette, grabbing her. The leather of his coat crunched as he pulled her close, and his belt grazed her belly as he lifted her against his body with one strong hand.

Embarrassing. And still not natural.

Buffy pulled away. One side of his face was burning gold from the lamp in the corner, his hair white. Everything else was dark: the shadows around his eyes, his lashes, his black pupils. His lips were parted, and he looked down at her as if he needed...he just needed. Spike.

She'd said his name, and he responded as he always did, with a faintly amazed, dawning smile. As if it were her first word to him. And men--men were supposed to grow jaded, take women for granted. All the more wrong then, that Spike's eyes still brightened after all this time. He had loved Drusilla a hundred years. How long would he love her?

Spike drew his lower lip between his teeth, glanced up at the basement door. "Got time for a tumble?" Voice low and rude, that smile, his head dipping for her neck.

"No!" Buffy wrestled herself away, feeling rumpled and excited but feigning annoyance.
"Oh, come on. Appetizer before dinner."

"I haven't even had lunch."

"Not good," he said, suddenly quite serious. He pulled away with a frown, backed up a step, panned his gaze up and down her body in a way not at all lascivious. "How're you gonna get a good work-out if you're all weak and spongy?"

"Spongy?"

"You know." He waved a hand. "Floppy. Like a rag doll."

"Hey! I'm ready to throw down, don't worry." Buffy folded her arms. "Just because I skip a meal doesn't mean I can't take your bony white ass."

"Oh, really?" One sharp brow raised in exaggerated remark. "Well, we'll see, won't we?"

"Yes, we will."

They smiled at each other anticipatorily, and there was something predictable about this little exchange, about him, but it wasn't a bad thing at that moment. It made Buffy think: *I know him.*

Through time and attrition, with proof after proof between them, Spike had become someone to depend on. She might not trust him as she had Angel, or Riley--with her heart. But if heart and mind had their doubts, her instincts didn't. When she acted without thinking, it was to give him her trust.

Yet even now as his dark eyes flashed in regard, cool and round and steady as a snake's, Buffy felt part of herself step aside and ask: *When will he hurt me?*

He was still a killer.

And so was she.

---

Evening had fallen in the world outside the Magic Box, and cars swished along the street on their way home to network television and chicken dinners and the safety of dead-bolts. Drivers focused on getting to their front doors before it was much darker, mentally counting the paces between car and porch, wishing they'd moved away from Sunnydale after high school, all those years ago.

Inside the Magic Box, behind its own locked door, a meeting stirred to life.

"It's a big decision," complained Buffy.

"Your call," Xander said firmly.

"I think you should choose."

"Nope. You're the slayer. It's tradition."
"Oh, for the love of--" said Spike in disgust, leaving the object of his affection unvoiced.

Buffy peered into the box Xander was holding. "If you'd gotten more than one of each," she began plaintively. "Where's the tradition of three jelly, three chocolate--the tradition of threes?"

"Well, okay. I thought I'd try something new. Don't you think it lends a sharp edge of excitement to the opening ceremonies?"

"No," she said emphatically, frowning. "Some things shouldn't change." Committing herself, she pulled out a cream-filled doughnut. "Barvarian," she announced with a sense of accomplishment. Her decision evoked a tiny squeak from Willow, and Buffy's eyes widened. "Oh, no, wait. Will, why don't you--"

"My god!" said Spike. "Just eat the sodding doughnut!" He grabbed the box from Xander, flung it to the center of the table, pointed a finger at it. "Pick, all of you! On with it! I can feel my bloody bones crumbling to dust as I sit here!"

Everyone quickly grabbed a pastry, while Spike glared. And Buffy wondered if their obedience was simply a parody of good manners, or some weird acknowledgment of authority where none existed. Or maybe it was just that her friends were fair-minded, in a way that Sunnydale bred to its inhabitants, and could recognize their own dorkiness even while hating Spike; like her, were capable of feeling embarrassed in front of vampires. Strangeness of this kind was endemic to the town. At times, Buffy suspected she lived in a reality so different from the rest of the world that she could never move anywhere else without making a freak of herself.

"I hereby call the meeting to order," Buffy said gamely, then bit deep into her doughnut, hoping someone else would take charge. Because this time she didn't want to be the one to ask Willow how the translations were going.

There was silence. A painful, stretchy sort of silence, accompanied by busy chewing and busily flickering eyes as glances passed from Xander to Buffy, Buffy to Willow, Tara to Buffy, Xander to Willow. Spike sat back in his chair, head swiveling to take them all in, brows drawn together as if he couldn't quite fathom their lameness. He'd sat in on plenty of Scooby meetings, but he still seemed to marvel at them.

"Okay," Buffy sighed, when it became clear they could sit there all night. "I guess we should--"

A knock came on the shop door, and everyone looked at each other, startled and counting heads. But they were all there.

"Probably just someone who can't read the big closed sign," said Anya, standing. "Illiteracy in America is on the rise again."

Buffy glanced across the table. "Spike." He caught her eye, realized she wanted him to shadow Anya for muscle, and obeyed routinely. Xander paused mid-chew as if just noticing that his own opportunity for protective chivalry had been lost.

"So, to the agenda," Buffy began again. Having the vague idea that organizational props would help deter conflict, she'd brought to the meeting a pencil and a pad of paper; the top sheet of the pad was blank except for the word 'agenda.' She carefully underlined this now and made a neat bullet point underneath, next to which, if she was lucky, a word would soon appear. "I guess the first topic of discussion is--Dawn." She blinked up at her tall little sister, while Anya and Spike retook their seats.
"Hey, guys." Dawn aimed a quick smile in the direction of the table, which dropped away as she turned and said businesslike to Buffy: "I need money."

"You've had your allowance," she said. And she hated to hear herself saying that in such a momlike way in front of the others, but in the back of her mind lately had been the novel and ungenerous thought that if Dawn wanted more of the foldy-spendy, maybe it was time to start earning, like so many other perfectly normal non-slayer kids did.

"And it's gone. I had to get a new gym-shirt."

"Because your old one was...?"

"Stolen. Maybe used to line a nest." Dawn tossed her hair back, pulled a knowing face. "I think there's some kind of gym-clothes-taking monster lurking in the school basement. Stuff has been vanishing for a few weeks now."

"God, Dawn! Why didn't you tell me and if you're making this up you are so grounded." I am not a pushover, thought Buffy. Am I?

"Well, it could just be Amber Tennison," Dawn admitted. "She's got velcro for fingers."

"Uh huh." And Buffy couldn't help but remember that the fingers of Dawn Summers had once been velcro too, before a certain talk, but Dawn was limpid-eyed, brow untroubled, and if this was misdirection Buffy knew she was dealing with a pro. "Well, I'll have to give it to you tomorrow. I don't have any money on me."

Thunderclouds lowered on the horizon. Buffy knew that look. She hated that look, that ugly little scowl. "You could borrow it from petty cash."

"The money is in the safe for the evening," said Anya, in a tone that conveyed it was staying there.

Dawn cast her appeal across the crowd, expression morphing into a hopeful plea as she played on their good natures. Hands began reaching for bags and wallets. "Hey!" Buffy said sharply. "Don't look to them for money. They aren't your personal ATMs." Everyone stopped reaching except Spike, who--oblivious to the collective discomfort--yanked out a cash roll and peeled off bills whose denominations Buffy couldn't make out. "Do not give her that," Buffy warned.

Her snap made him look up, then around. She could see him picking up the vibe at last, but he seemed genuinely bemused and a bit irritated. "Why not? If I've got it, she can have it."

Dawn grinned brilliantly and began tripping around the table. "Stop!" Buffy pointed her finger and her sister froze in her tracks, daring to pout. Greedy pig, she thought.

"Look, 's not a big deal," Spike said, money in hand. "Stolen anyway. Might as well do some good and enfranchise the Niblet here."

Buffy stared at him in appalled wonder, unable to fathom where in those statements he thought logic lurked.

"Plausible deniability," she said, exasperated. "Is that too much to ask? And no," she added, head swiveling to Dawn, who'd started creeping forward again, "you can't have the ill-gotten gains of Velcro Fingers here."
"Thieving's an old and honest profession," said Spike, his scowl matching Dawn's. God, it was like
having two teenagers. "Well, all right, dishonest. But it takes craft and cunning and clever hands."
Buffy threatened to cripple him with her glare, but he only seemed to grow perversely more irked.
"And damn it, you've found it a useful talent to have on call plenty of times, Slayer, and don't say
you haven't. It all springs from the same source, so give that royal glower a rest, why don't you."
She raised a brow, but its power failed. Spike dashed off a sharp laugh, and something in its tenor
charged the air, made her skin prickle. The money roll was still balanced in his left hand, bills
caught between the fingers of his right. "Oh, what? It's okay when you're saving the universe, but
wrong if it puts blood on the table? Come down from Cloud Cuckoo-Land. Survival's about more
than bashin' demon skulls. While you're traipsin' around with your heroic slayage, the rest of the
world scrounges just to hang onto a ten foot patch."

It was a ridiculously unfair accusation, but it stung, if only from fear that the others might agree. "I
hang on by my fingernails every day," she said roughly, thinking of her go-nowhere job in the very
shop that enclosed them now in its shadows, and the bills stacked on her rolltop desk. Didn't she
pull double duty in life when most people her age were out there having fun, getting drunk, seeing
the world?

"Yeah? Well the rest of us do, too," Spike retorted. "Food, a roof over our heads, dosh for a bottle
now and then--we all have the same basic needs." His voice was harsh and low. "Not just the
privilege of humans, this desire for existence."

Buffy felt herself flushing, incensed and embarrassed at what felt like a flank attack. "And I never
said it was. Can we talk about this later?" They stared each other down in mute anger under the
sharp lamp-light, while everyone else looked pointedly otherwhere. Where was this sudden mood,
this insurgence, coming from, she wondered. His face was so white, so hard. He was a vampire, a
thing without a soul, but was that the reason--was this ordinary rage, or was every rage
extraordinary with someone like him?

"Fine," he said, and she could see him roll the word in his mouth like a cold marble. But he was not
giving in. "But I give my money where I like." Staring at Buffy, he held out the cash to Dawn, who
looked nervously her way, then tentatively took it.

Buffy wanted to hit him, punish him for his infraction. It made her furious. But as he stared at her
with his blue eyes, she had one of those problematic moments, where she knew she held him to
different standards. She wouldn't have felt this same unholy rage at Xander if he'd given Dawn
money, even with her authority undermined. Double standard wasn't quite right--Xander would
never have stolen it in the first place, or railed against her so unreasonably--but her friends were her
friends, and Spike was Spike, and Spike sensed the divide she'd made and hated it, in some
important way she couldn't quite deal with yet.

It was just as unfair that he should put her in this position, though, especially when he had the
moral low ground. But she said nothing as Dawn folded the bills and tucked them away, then
quietly slunk out. A few words of farewell tossed at the table, Anya following to lock the door
behind her. Doughnuts sitting with bite-marks on the table top. Coffees cooling. Spike leaned back
again, shoulders tense with upset under the weight of black leather. Xander's mouth tight. Willow's
eyes unsure, watchful. Tara's face concerned.

This was their round table, thought Buffy, staring at her notepad on which no word had yet been
written. This was Camelot.

Anya came back, stood with her hands clasped together. "The big dramatic scene has created
lingering tension." When no one spoke, she sat down. "Money is very exciting that way. It stirs up
passions. Those thick wads rolling in your hands. The individual bills, some crisp, some soft." Her eyes went dreamy.

"Moving into soft-core there, An." Xander's voice was gentle and dry, and though he spoke to Anya he looked at Buffy, drawing her attention.

She gathered herself at his subtle cue, turning the burner under her temper down to a low boil. "Speaking of moving. On. I wanted to get everyone together, so we can decide how to tackle this whole prophecy thing. I don't want to be caught twiddling our thumbs the way we were with Glinda. Something serious is coming." She measured tone to words. "So what have we got?" she asked, looking at them and ready to take stock. "A scroll with some vague warnings about 'darkness rising', a notebook we can't read--"

"A dead guy with rented furniture and a suspiciously clean paper trail," said Xander, picking up the thread.

"Demons and humans working together," Tara kicked in.

Buffy nodded, her gratitude building at the contributions. "References to the water supply."

"And the 'New Reich'." Xander again. "Whatever that means."

"New order coming," said Spike matter of factly. He was sprawled back, one shoulder higher than the other. "Master race, rise to power. Humans turning into demons."

"What?" said Buffy, alarmed, as everyone turned his way, mouths agape. "Where did you hear all that?"

A distracted look passed across Spike's face as if he were just remembering something left on the stove. "Er, didn't I mention?"

"Er, no," said Xander sharply.

"Foss, when he was chained up--fellow had a go at recruiting me. Gave the usual sales pitch, something about the righteous reclaiming this plane. Humans bowing down and all that. Heard it a hundred times before."

Willow frowned. "Humans transforming into demons, you said."

"Yeah. Apparently Old Patchy Face was goin' through the change himself."

"It happens more often than you think," Anya said to the table at large. "There's a big market out there for disaffected souls. D'Hoffryn tried to recruit you once, didn't he?" She directed the question to Willow in an oddly professional tone, like one actor to another, mentioning an audition.

"Uh, yeah." Willow glanced around with an expression of guilt. "When I was young and stupid. He probably wouldn't want me now that I'm...older."

"Oh, he'd probably still want you." Anya smiled in reassurance. "He's very selective."

"Thanks," Willow said dryly, while Tara directed a faintly irritated look Anya's way. "Nice to know I have a fallback career."

"Especially in today's job market," agreed Anya. Her face was smooth, the edge of her voice blunted--but was that a glint in her eye? Buffy couldn't tell. It was hard to know anymore how
much of Anya's blind spot for sarcasm remained. If she was retaliating, she was far too skillful to be caught.

Buffy added 'humans --> demons?' to her bulleted list. "Okay," she said, studying the notes she'd made. "So what does all this add up to?" There was a pause for collective thought, but no evidence that thought was actually occurring. Eventually she made herself look at Willow. "Will, not to push, but...anything?"

Willow's shoulders stiffened, collarbones sharpening at the movement. Impossible not to notice the anxiety, but Buffy wasn't sure how much longer she could overlook a lack of results for that reason. "The notebook's definitely in a demon code of some kind," Willow said. "Not Naciran. But Foss did write a few words in English." She flipped pages: "'Cottler' and 'DeKorne'." She met Buffy's eyes. "When I was researching the water angle, I found out there's a DeKorne Filtration Plant in town, where imported water is treated for contaminants. Cottler is an engineer there."

Nearly giddy with relief at this unexpected sign of progress, Buffy beamed and said, "That's great! A lead. We have a lead." She noted it on her list, the looked up again. "What else?"

"That's about it," Willow said in a low voice, as if she were bracing for Buffy's disappointment. She turned the notebook around in her hands, fingers tense, rubbing at the faux leather.

"Oh." She paused, then said, "I talked to Giles today." She had to look square at Willow for this. There was no other way. "He said he hadn't heard from you in a while...but you know," her voice quickened, "I think he'd be really glad to help. With the translations. With anything."

"Yeah," said Willow slowly. "I should write him." An awkward moment hung, in which Buffy expected more--explanations, apologies, but all Willow said was, "I've been pretty busy."

"We'd be glad to help too," Buffy went on.

"How?" The one word was mild, posed as a genuine question but hiding a challenge.

"I don't know," Buffy said reflexively, then paced words to her running thoughts. "I mean, I could be action girl, head out the plant and shake down this guy Cottler, but I'd kinda like more information first." Her voice wavered a bit as she looked at Spike: "I don't want to drag anyone else in for questioning if we can figure this out for ourselves." She paused a moment, gaze briefly lowering as she thought about Foss. Foss's body. She didn't want to know, did she. She made herself refocus. No one was speaking. In frustrated hesitancy, she looked to the others, then to Willow. "What if...maybe we could each take a sheet from the notebook, see what we come up with?"

"Because you're all so skilled at demon languages," said Willow. The words were soft and she smiled gently when she said them, so maybe that had been ironical, thought Buffy, and not the small, mean sarcasm it seemed.

Tara looked sidelong at her friend, brow pinching in reproof. "You never know. Fresh eyes might help."

"Fresh eyes when we're sitting across from a jar of fresh eyes--did anyone else go to that place?" Xander asked, hand raised. "But on actual topic, count me in. I'd be willing to take a crack at some demon code. Hit the books, put pen to paper. Be like old times. I think I can still do that pen thing." He tilted his head considerably and flexed his hand. "Yeah, yeah. I can feel it coming back to me."

"Okay, sure, why not," Willow said suddenly. "Let's give it a whirl. I'll make some photocopies."
There was something in her smile Buffy didn't like, a little twist that suggested she was humoring them without any real confidence in their usefulness. And, okay, maybe they weren't the brains of the group, but hey—they might get lucky.

"Nuhhhhh," Buffy groaned, lifting her head from the pages of the book she'd bonked it on. She looked around. Hours had passed, and the table was covered with the signs of their effort. Lots of crumpled paper, open books, half-empty cups from the latte run, pizza crusts. Xander was frowning into a thick text, while Tara and Willow each had head bent to scribbling. Anya sat on the floor with her legs stretched out, back against the shelves, a heavy book resting in her hands. Spike was... Spike was actually working. It was bizarre to watch. He'd removed his duster and was hunched over his own little pile of papers and books, writing something with his left hand. Had she ever seen a pencil in his hand? She couldn't remember.

"Harris," he said abstractedly, "hand over that Growney Lexicon."

Xander roused himself just enough to find the book and pass it over before returning his attention to the page he read.

I am action girl, Buffy reminded herself with a forlorn sigh as she looked over her own stack of books. And not at all inadequate.

A few hours later, the atmosphere in the room had shifted. Xander's head was resting on his arms, Tara held a sheet of densely worded paper and stared at it glassy-eyed, Anya had taken refuge behind her cash register to read magazines, and Spike sprawled back in his chair, staring at the ceiling as if something was written there. Willow had opened her laptop and was the only one doing what could be called work.

"Tiphor, Syac, Grebuel," Spike said meditatively to the ceiling. He paused for thought, then decided: "No."

Buffy threw her pen down, landing it in the groove of the Most Annoying Book Ever, whatever it was. She couldn't remember. Something with words. Many words making many lines, running the wrong way down the pages. "Uncle," she said.

With a startled gaspy sound, Xander jerked upright and blinked around the room, still dream-dazed. "Uncle Rory?"

"So who's up for raiding a water treatment plant?" Buffy asked.

Spike raised one hand tiredly, followed by Tara and then Xander, who leaned forward to settle his arms on the table and added, "Thank god. And can there be hitting involved?" He shifted as Anya
returned to the table and sat next to him. "Because right now I'd really like to find some bad people and hit them. With very heavy books."

"Yeah," said Spike. "Good plan."

Stale anger leftover from hours earlier reheated inside Buffy for a moment; she gave him a hard stare, then directed a guilty glance from under her lashes at Willow, who hadn't stopped typing. Her friend's face was tired and tense and pale in the artificial light. She looked far older than her years, and Buffy had a better inkling now of how it must be wearing on her; all this heavy mental lifting and nothing to show for it, when they all knew something terrible was coming at them like a train racing forward out of the darkness.

"How you doin', Will?" Willow didn't change expression and her fingers continued to fly over the keys; she might have been in a trance. "Will." Buffy reached out gently and touched her arm, and Willow twitched with a tiny breath. Typing ceased.

"What? What?" She shook free of her reverie and looked around, lower lip hanging open a little in an adorable way, the rest of her sagging with exhaustion.

Buffy smiled. "Just wanted to see how you were doing. I think we're going to call it a night."

"Doing?" Willow's voice cracked slightly, and Buffy realized the trance had been covering for a very deep level of freak-out. "Oh, I'm doing great. See, I have this cool thing going on where I can see a big demon invasion coming that will bring darkness to the world and pain to my friends, but I can't do anything to stop it. It's a new and different kind of fun. I'm thinking maybe next I'll peel off all my skin with a nail file."

"Nail file'd never work," Spike said seriously. "Can't really get a good edge on--"

He broke off at Buffy's look, and Willow turned her head sharply his way at the same moment. Her eyes were dark; not black-magic dark, but almost as scary. "Did I ask for a remark out of you?" she said, the question whipping and cold. "I don't think so. So shut the hell up."

Spike simply stared at her, lips parted in surprise, and then in delayed response his entire body stiffened, a movement of muscle under skin that once would have presaged attack. "I'm getting damn tired of your attitude, witch." His voice was effortfully level but fiercely wound. "And I'll say what I bloody well like--"

Buffy had a rebuke on her lips, but Willow was faster.

"Yeah, you do what you like, you say what you like. You lie and steal and use people up. And oh, hey, kill them and drink their blood. And as soon as you have the chance, you'll try to do the same to us. You think you're fooling anyone?" Her voice stabbed at him, yet Buffy couldn't make herself stop it. "We all know what's lurking behind that pretty face is garbage. Buffy keeps you on a leash as a laughing-stock, a lesson to vamps everywhere."

Tara made a sound, and Buffy heard herself gasping, "Will, no!" as Spike's face froze.

He looked down for one still and deliberate moment, then up at Buffy with terrible directness, eyes glittering, mouth a tight line before he forced out speech. "That right?"

Caught between her own half-lies and half-truths, Buffy didn't even know what she believed. Words dried up in her throat.

"Tell me," he said savagely, lurching to his feet and leaning on the table with his hands spread out
flat, chair toppled over next to him. "You tell me now. Here. The truth."

"It was...it was a joke." She shot a look at Willow, whose anger was visible in her cheeks and glaring eyes. Buffy shook her head slightly. "A joke."

"That's not what it sounded like to me," Willow said.

Spike's mouth tightened, jaw twisting. "Now then. You tell them how you feel about me, Buffy. You tell me."

It was another order, and she didn't take orders well. She'd give him one, but not two. Not when she was still so angry, not when he was trying to pry her guts out here in front of all her friends, to make a messy spill of her feelings. She stared mutely back at him, stubborn in refusal, and the silence lengthened, no one else daring to break it. His eyes raged at her, and then finally wordlessly begged, but she said nothing and he reverted, as he always did, to wrath. A cold wrath this time, set to the temperature of the table.

"You want to hear a joke?" he asked, watching her, gauging her response for the moment of impact. "This relationship's a joke." She flinched at his softness. And he yanked his coat up off the floor and strode out, banging as he went, Anya wincing at each crash of merchandise in his path. He went out the front door--not through it, and that was something, but it slammed into the wall, probably kicked.

For a moment, they all simply sat there; and then Anya got up to lock the door.

"Will, my god." Tara stared at her lover, spots of color in her cheeks nearly matching Willow's own. "Why did you say those things?"

"Maybe because they're true?" Willow answered with edge.

"We agreed to let Buffy manage her own life." Tara's face was coalescing into something hard and unpleasant. "We agreed, all of us, not to tear each other down. Spike included."

"Uh, yeah." Willow cocked her head. "And then Buffy became run-off-at-the-mouth psycho girl, because repression is unhealthy, Tara."

"Politeness isn't," Tara snapped back.

"And we should always be polite to the dead," Xander put in sarcastically.

Anya glanced his way. "Well, that's not a terrible rule." She looked at Buffy and raised one shoulder. "You could slay them after all, and still be polite."

"Hey, slaying," said Willow. "Now there's an idea." But then something in her face altered as if she'd caught herself, and she made quick eye contact with Xander. "Except, no. Not while he's chipped. I, I wouldn't want that."

"Hey, I," began Xander, and fell silent, chin jerking as if he'd bitten off the words. Would, he'd been about to say. I would.

She felt at a great distance from them, their antagonism and babble breaking like waves on a far shore. But she was at sea, caught in the undertow. Buffy stared across the table, gaze level with the emptiness where he'd been sitting. How upset was she, what did she feel? She wasn't sure. She didn't know how she couldn't know, after all this time. Maybe her body was back on shore with the others, and this was her out in the deep blue sea, separated from it, adrift from herself.
"Tomorrow," she said. Everyone fell silent and looked her way. "Tomorrow night at nine we'll visit the filtration plant, see what we can find out."

Glances were exchanged; she could see them communicating with each other silently. Tip-toeing around the Buffy. What a joke that was. They stomped all over her, tap-danced on her feelings, kicked with their pointy shoes. And now they tip-toed.

She loved her friends, but she was tired.

The lights had all been turned off, except for the one lamp on the bedside table, which cast a subdued circular glow.

"Tonight didn't go so well," said Anya, shimmying out of her dress. "I've noticed that our group dynamic is extremely dysfunctional. There's a lot of hostility beneath the surface and, frankly, on the surface."

"And a lot of surface," Xander noted dryly, lacing his arms behind his head and watching her. The closet door was open, half shielding her from view, but he could see bits and pieces of her moving as she hung up her dress, unhooked her bra. She had such a beautiful back. Not to mention her satiny, satin-clad backside.

"I've been giving this some thought."

"Therapy?" he parroted obligingly, smiling down at the top of her head.

"Yes. They have therapists who specialize in families, and we're like a family. You've said so."

"Well, true, but--"

"Willow would be able to deal with her addiction and codependency issues in a supportive group environment, and Buffy could work out her absent-father trauma. And you and Spike could deal with your repressed homoerotic tension--"

"Our dear god, what?!" Xander yanked his arm away and sat up, covers falling to his waist. He backed into the corner of the bed and stared down at her in horror. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, relax," scoffed Anya. "It's a perfectly normal social mechanism. Homoerotic impulses get sublimated into aggression and diverted into heterosexual relationships. I'm quite grateful for it, actually. You're a stallion under the--"

"Anya!" he yelped, putting his hands over his ears. "I'm not hearing this, not hearing this. La la la la la!

And then she said something else that sounded to him like: "La la la (only brought it up) la la la (aggression is becoming) la la la (otherwise) la (happy) la la la (anything at all)."

"Stop talking!" He didn't take his hands down until her lips stopped moving, but he kept his
distance, still tense and appalled. "Look. I'm going to forget you said that." His hands chopped the air, squaring a box to contain the conversation. Close the box, put it away. "And for the love of god, never say it again. To anyone, but especially to me. Because it's crazy talk. I hate Spike. He's an evil undead creature of the night and it makes me sick to think of him touching Buffy." She opened her mouth to say something, and he pointed a warning finger at her until she closed it. "He makes me sick, period. All vampires do. They're unnatural. Vampires shouldn't be having sex or relationships or a good night's rest. They should be killed."

Anya frowned and tilted her head on the pillow to regard him. "You're a vampi-phobe, you know."

"Yes. And strangely I'm okay with that."

She sighed and pulled him down next to her. They lay face to face on the pillows, Xander still unnerved, fearful of more blurted, horrible theories about his psyche. "You're a good man," she said, stroking his face. Her voice was soft, her eyes forgiving. "And I love you."

"But?" he asked warily. He could clearly hear the unsaid but, the qualifier. There always was one; he'd been raised on this home truth, seen it in the faces of his parents at every evening meal, every disappointing report card, every mediocre Little League game.

Anya smiled at him with her whole gentle face, her fingers sliding to touch his lips like a blessing. "But nothing at all."

His dream girl, his demon lover. His benediction. Xander felt something in his world shift at that moment.

"Let's do it," he said quietly, staring into her eyes. He was jumping off the cliff, and love was rushing up to meet him. He took a deep breath. "I'm ready. Let's make a baby."

It was a quiet neighborhood, one of the wealthier ones where the inhabitants could afford good alarm systems and fencing and their own private security patrols. Being here always felt odd to Willow; her own family had been well-off, but this was money, serious prelapsarian Cordelia-level money. That kind of money built a different landscape--a different view, literally, looking down from the hillside over the rooftops of the valley of Sunnydale, which lay like a quilt of scattered lights among larger pockets of darkness. You couldn't see the monsters from up here. You saw only what you wanted to see.

She closed the window on the sharp night air and turned toward the room. Tara had replicated the interior of her old dorm room as faithfully as possible, as if trying to create stability. A home. Or maybe it was just that her possessions stamped the room as uniquely hers, even though it was a dull, boxy mother-in-law suite above a rich couple's two-car garage.

Tara had changed into a gold nightgown and was removing her necklace. She caught Willow's eye; her face still troubled, aloof. Seeing that expression hurt. It made Willow ache to defend herself, to bury herself in Tara's arms and absolution and whisper: *You don't understand. Our world is going to hell and Spike is going to turn on us.*

"Still mad?" she asked tentatively, hoping she had on her cute face.
"I didn't like you tonight, Willow." Tara coolly dropped her pendant, Willow's birthday gift, onto the top of the bureau. She took it off every night to keep the chain from kinking, but tonight the gesture gave Willow an anguished pang as if it represented something broken, something lost. "It was unkind, what you said. And cruel. Not just to Spike, but to Buffy. What's with you? I thought you were dealing with him. Now all of a sudden you're different." She sat at the head of the bed, one leg drawn up, and gave Willow a more open, inviting look. "Something's upsetting you. What is it?"

Gratefully, Willow moved to sit with her. "I've just been thinking a lot lately, Tara. This thing they have--where's it going? Answer: nowhere. It's wrong. And it's icky." She shook her head. "I can't condone it. I have to keep trying to make her see--"

"By insulting him? Honey, that's never going to work and you know it." Willow was given hope by the endearment, and thought Tara might take her hand. But hands remained firmly in lap, and Tara tipped her head, long hair curtaining one shoulder. "You're only driving a wedge between yourself and Buffy."

"A wedge?" Shocked, she instinctively denied it. "No. No wedge. We're wedgeless." But she read the truth in Tara's eyes, and thought of the things she'd said that evening in the icy heat of the moment. Her face crumpled and she tried to stave off panic.

Tara did take her hand now. "You can't make people see what they don't want to see. Brute force--it breaks things. Not always in the way you hope."

Willow lowered her eyes. Tara held her conscience, and in her, brute force was bent to curvy goodwill and kindness. Sometimes she wished she could be more like Tara, who was a good person by nature, not by effort. Part of her was enthralled and moved by that nature, part of her impatient. Even resentful. She kept that part shoved down in the back of her mind.

"I don't want to break us," she said quietly, squeezing Tara's hand on the final word. "Not over this."

"We're not broken. But I'm always going to be honest with you, Willow. Tell you what I think. What I feel."

Willow looked up, smiling a tiny smile as she met her lover's eyes, feeling the sun peep around cloudbank to warm her bones. "I count on it," she said shyly, twining her fingers more strongly with Tara's and getting a crooked smile in response.

"You're not easy, you know."

"But I'm worth the effort though, right?" Willow pulled a face, comical and imploring, to hide her true anxiety. "A little elbow grease and I shine right--"

Tara leaned forward to kiss her, interruptive, delicious, the scent of gardenia coming off her skin. Willow murmured a small oh and returned the kiss as a tide of want rose. She cupped the back of Tara's neck to pull her in, mouth opening wider, and this was hunger, this was life. A kiss, a sigh.

"Don't be cruel," Tara pulled away to say, her lips brushing Willow's.

"Me? No." Willow breathed the words, dizzied.

"Be you. Be Willow. You have so much strength inside you--and love."

"I feel it." A soft and spinning orb, this world of love.
"You don't have to hide these things." Willow's eyes opened as a needle of fear pricked her, the moment welling like a drop of blood, poised to fall and stain the white bedspread on which they sat. But Tara was smiling, her eyes clear and unaccusatory. "All this fear," said Tara. "It doesn't have to rule you."

The globe of love tilted back on its axis and settled into its proper place to spin again. "I'm not afraid," Willow said, assuring herself along with Tara. And for that moment she wasn't. Because she had this. And if she had her way, nothing would change it.

Not even the end of the world.

_____________________________________________________

All the fear has left me now. I'm not frightened anymore. It's my heart that pounds beneath my flesh; it's my mouth that pushes out this breath.

Buffy stared at the muted television as the stereo played, images of cheetahs unsynchronized to the music's slow beat. It was just her and Sarah McLachlan now in the shadowed living room, together again as they'd been so many times before. Inevitable, really. What else was there to do at a time like this but call on Saint Sarah, patron saint of moody girlfriends, to save her from the stormy swells that all relationships eventually hit. She knew these deeps; sometimes found herself pushed overboard as her ship sailed off. Kicking and sinking, not waving but drowning.

If she went to him now, he would take her in.

She shut off the television, cut off the music mid-lyric.

"I won't fear love," she said to herself, testing the thought out loud as she passed by the family pictures on the wall, her mother smiling; her younger, sunnier self staring out with the bright eyes of a girl who was not yet a slayer, whose parents were happily married. Her sister smiled too, a ghost in the camera. An invention of love.

Who was she kidding. It was too late in the day to be brave. Or, if you looked at the clock, too early.

Buffy went upstairs to bed.

_____________________________________________________

The door was her door, and when she opened it, she didn't need a key. She dropped her jacket and called for her mother. In the living room, Joyce lay on the couch, smiling. Her skirt up in that embarrassing way, her legs crooked. Spike was sitting on the coffee table, stroking his hand up the inside of her thigh, holding a mug of cocoa in the other. The ambulance was coming; the wail of its siren rising. When she entered the room, Spike stood and she saw he that wore a strange uniform, its great-coat long and black like Angel's. She moved to him, and he took her in his arms to kiss her
hello. Dawn came in to sit with her mom, to babysit so she and Spike could leave for their dinner date. "I killed Willow," she told him as they walked through town. "I have to live my life the way that's right for me."

He said something about the movie they were going to see, trying to explain its plot, which was a lot like the Discovery channel special she'd watched the night before. "And then this herd of gazelles is trying to reach Cuba," he told her. "But the lions have the U-boat and can't reach the shore. Too many waves. Rated 'R', I think, but they'll let you in with me."

"It's snowing," she noticed.

"I have a lot of lions," he said, offering this to her with a look of intense hope, his eyes wide and blue, full of wonder.

They stood at the crossroads in the center of town as cars drove by on either side of them. It wasn't snowing any longer but the street white in every direction, snowbanks piled high against the old-fashioned shopfronts. It was like being in Switzerland. Children hid in the houses, out of sight behind the shuttered windows. Laughing. Somewhere the armies were massed and about to attack, or maybe were on maneuvers. Something army-like and important. Soldiers milled in the street, on leave. A vampire ate a jelly doughnut.

"Companion to our demons," Spike said authoritatively, nodding at one of the soldier boys.

"You're bleeding." She stared at the place where Spike's heart wasn't, a gaping hole in his chest that had left his shirt nearly undamaged but edged with gore. It bled onto the snow, drops falling at her feet.

"Oh, yeah." He looked down, smiling as a man might. "All gone now."

"Did it hurt?"

But he didn't answer, and she could only stare at the orb embedded in his chest, a black marble thing heavy with his soul, boiling inside like a rough and captive sea. The skin had closed around the wound where the soldiers had fixed him, after she'd put her sword through him.

"We're going to miss the movie," she said, staring around the deserted streets, empty again of soldiers. "It's so late."

Spike opened his coat and it lifted behind him like a pair of enormous black wings. It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen. As he smiled down at her, she was enfolded.

"Later than you think, love," he said, his lips unmoving.

When she bent and kissed the cold glass of his soul, she woke up.

Fourteen hours, three coffees, and a few thousand calories later, it was night again.

"Just us?" asked Buffy, looking from Willow to Xander. She shrugged into her jacket and pulled on a light scarf.
"Anya and Tara are having a, uh, girl's night out." Xander sounded weirdly grave about this, and Buffy couldn't decide if he was amused, or nervous about the discussion potential.

"They abstained," confirmed Willow with a quirk of lips. Her eyes flickered to Xander's and something unsaid passed between them.

"Their evening involves chocolate, margaritas, and a chick flick." Xander pushed his hands into his pockets. "Ours potentially involves demons, poisoned water, and head injuries." He gave a short, contemplative laugh.

"You could join them," Buffy said.

"Well, the chick flick kinda brings it into balance, so I'm thinking I'll stay with the original plan."

They stood there gathered in the foyer of Buffy's house for a long, uncomfortable moment before Willow said, "Buffy, about last night--"

"Forget about it."

"No, but I, I was just going to say--"

"I know."

Willow didn't look happy, and Buffy didn't feel happy. She'd wanted to have this conversation in some form, to find out what was on her friend's mind to make her so testy. Now she didn't want to hear it; she knew enough. And they had more important things to do tonight.

She let Xander drive the SUV to the plant, Willow directing them from her map. When they pulled up at its perimeter, the headlights flashed across a barbed-wire fence, on which hung a sign with 'DeKorne Filtration Plant, No. 2' printed in big black letters.

"Wire cutters in the back?" Xander asked, looking over his shoulder.

Buffy nodded. "Next to the swords." She paused for reflection. "You know, it's a good thing I never get stopped by the cops."

"That would be awkward," Willow agreed, laughing. She sounded a bit over-eager, as if she wanted to bond in the old jokey-Scooby fashion.

And it could have been a bonding moment, but Buffy let it slide by, looking away from Willow's crestfallen face. They stood by the side of the truck enduring more awkwardness, while Xander tested the fence for a current and then cut the links for them to pass through.

They made it inside the plant within a few minutes, and snuck through the empty corridors, occasionally hugging the walls as they approached a corner, their flashlights playing across the ground. Very X-Filesy, Buffy thought, leading the way. If this were TV, a big mutant would jump out at them right about now, and...hold on. That wasn't TV. That was just her life.

"Where are we going?" she asked Willow, who was peering at a blueprint of the building as they walked.

"Um, take a left at corridor A-3, walk about half an inch, then take a right at the square boxy thing that isn't on the map legend." Buffy cast a dry look back at her, and kept on more or less according to the directions. "We want the labs on the second floor," said Willow. "Cottler has an office up there."
"You said they have a night shift?" asked Xander, panning his flashlight along the upper walls in search of cameras.

"Yeah, but if we're careful, we should be able to avoid them. Besides, it's just a skeleton crew."

Xander flashed his light briefly in her face. "Don't say skeleton crew."

"What's this?" Buffy wondered, as they began passing down a hall with set after set of broad windows. She stopped, cupping her face to peer through.

"That should be one of the reservoirs."

"Huh. Big," said Buffy, moving on dismissively. They reached the labs, most of which had doors standing open. "Trusting, aren't they." She entered the nearest one and began looking around.

"Yeah." Xander followed, pacing her down one of the counters and inspecting the equipment with puzzlement. "It doesn't really have that world-domination vibe, does it?"

"Well, it's probably not the staff themselves who are in on it," said Willow. "Except maybe this Cottler guy. And even he might just be a target of some kind."

"Here's his office," said Buffy, coming to a closed door with a plain name-plate next to it. She tried the knob. "Looks like he's down with the locking thing."

Willow folded up her map and tucked it in her pocket. "We should probably try to maintain a low profile with the B&E."

"Check. No breakage." She watched as Willow knelt and stuck a piece of twisted red paper in the lock. She lit the end on fire, blew it out quickly as it fizzed, and murmured a few Latiny words. A snicking sound later, and they were in.

"I never get tired of that trick," Willow said in satisfaction.

"You'd have made a great cat burglar," Xander agreed. "And hey, if it were the sixties, you could wear one of those skin-tight bodysuits, all black and slinky. I bet you'd have a groovy soundtrack too."

Buffy shot a glance their way, but they were happily investigating the office and saw no irony in talking up the glamour of a craft they all scorned when it was Spike.

"Would I get to rappel?" asked Willow, sitting at the desk and switching on the computer. "Because, you know. That's the coolest."

"You could rappel your little heart out."

Attention on the monitor, Willow bobbed her head from side to side and smiled, briefly happy in her cat burglar fantasy. Buffy pulled open the unlocked drawers of a file cabinet, top to bottom, rifling through the hanging folders. Nothing caught her eye, except--

"What's...'flocculation'?" she asked, reading from a label.

"It's a clarification process for removing sediment and other solids from water."

"Oh." Buffy put the file back. That didn't sound very promising.

"I've got something," said Willow, and Buffy moved to her side, abandoning the files with relief.
Xander drew near on the other side, and together they looked over Willow's shoulders. "There are some e-mails here in his sent folder. I just don't get it. No one ever clears out their sent folder. You'd think if you were going to accept bribes and conspire to sabotage the town water supply, you might want to remove the evidence. But no."

"So it is sabotage," said Buffy. "Do we know what it is--what they're putting in the water?"

"Mmm. It doesn't say. They just keep calling it the 'compound.' Wait, here they call it the 'neutralizing compound.'" Buffy and Xander exchanged a worried glance. Willow continued reading, silent for a moment, then said, "The e-mails really only discuss details of meetings and pick-ups. And there's some formula type stuff, about how many parts-per-million of the compound will be needed to...oh, wait, wait, wait."

"What, what, what?" asked Xander anxiously.

"It's a sedative."

"A sedative?" Buffy blinked, trying to work that one around in her mind. She'd thought poison for sure, or some kind of magical potion to make humans into demons.

"Yeah, there are some calculations here for dosage and concentration, and projections of how it will affect people depending on their body mass and method of intake. Like, whether they drink a glass of water straight, or get it through boiled noodles." She paused as if switching gears. "It's kind of weird."

Buffy raised her brows. "Kind of?"

"No. I mean, a sedative through the water supply." Willow looked up at her, frowning. "If you wanted to subdue a population, that's pretty hit or miss. There's no guaranteed dispersal pattern in the short-term. Now if they were trying to build up some kind of chronic effect over time, like a slow poison or something, I could understand using the water supply as a delivery system. But this...."

"If you want to sedate everyone," said Buffy slowly, thoughts falling into line, "you'd want to do it at a specific time, for a specific reason. Like an invasion."

"Right."

"Okay," Xander broke in, catching their attention. "So they're reaching. How is this any crazier than magical band candy?"

"Good point." Buffy never underestimated the wackiness of an enemy. Plots on the Hellmouth were rarely rational, and strategies were often so flawed that you could second-guess yourself to death if you weren't careful. "Besides. We don't even know what it is. It could be magical, this sedative--right?"

Willow shrugged one shoulder. "Sure. They're going about their calculations scientifically, but the compound could have magical properties."

"We've got to find this stuff," said Buffy. "Is there anything there that gives us a clue about where they're storing it?"

"Actually," Xander interrupted again, "more importantly? When are they putting it in the water." He looked from face to face. "If it's meant to take effect right away, that'll tell us when this whole invasion is going down."
"He's right," said Willow, something like horror washing across her expression. She slumped a little, and her hands slipped off the keyboard to rest below it, unmoving.

After a moment, Buffy shifted on her feet. "Will? You okay?"

"What? Oh, yeah." Willow blinked. "I'll, uh, keep searching here." She hunched, looking a bit uncomfortable at their looming presence by her shoulders. "Why don't you guys check out the files again. See if there's anything in there about this compound. It may be labeled as something else."

"Right," said Xander smartly, and came around the desk to join Buffy.

"No, wait!" Willow stood with an abrupt movement that sent the desk chair rolling back a few feet. Panic was written on her face.

Startled, Xander froze with his hands poised over a row of files. "What?" He and Buffy stared at her with wordless inquiry. Buffy thought Willow was beginning to look nearly sick.

"You feeling okay?" she asked, unsure how else to react.

"I, I thought I heard something." They all stood stock still in various attitudes of listening. After a minute, Willow cleared her throat quietly. "Guess I was wrong, but hey, I, I had another thought there in the, uh, listening moment. I think you guys should check out the feed system."

"The huh?" said Xander, cocking his head.

Willow passed over the map. "That's where they feed the chemicals into the water. It'll probably be in the pump room."

"You think it might already be set up with the compound?" Buffy asked, making the connection.

"I think there's a good chance," Willow replied, eyes widening in a weird kind of eagerness, her expression edged with something even stranger and harder to read. "So you should check that out. I'll just finish up here. And, uh, meet you there when I'm done."

"Okay," said Xander gamely. He moved shoulder to shoulder with Buffy out of the room, and pulled the door closed behind them. "So, hey," he said to her as they left the lab. "I'm thinking that if we all worked together, we could wean Will to decaf. You in?"

Buffy managed a smile, but felt a tug of sadness. "She's been working so hard. I think it's killing her not being able to nail this translation. First the scroll, now the notebook. She's used to being the can-do girl, and now she's can't-do. It's gotta be rough. I know if it were me, I'd be kicking down walls."

"I think I'd be building them," Xander said with a dry laugh.

She gave him a sidelong look. "Literally or figuratively?"

"Both, maybe. Power tools and denial. These things get me through the day."

"You're a manly man."

"Yes, I am," Xander said with a faint smile.

Buffy looped her arm through his in friendly fashion, an old, old fashion, from when they were teens and could do that sort of thing. She earned a surprised look but kept propelling him along. "So, listen," she said on a lilting note. "How do you feel about interior decoration?"
Left alone, Willow pressed her face into her hands for a moment and sighed shakily. It was hard deceiving friends, to keep constantly in mind the things they could and couldn't know. She'd come too close just now; Cottler's files might contain anything. They probably didn't; were probably just full of boring documents on plant management. But she couldn't take a chance. The judgment of how much information was too much lay entirely on her shoulders, and distinguishing between safe details and unsafe ones was getting harder every day. If Buffy found out enough to try and stop the invasion, she and the others—Xander, Tara, everyone Willow loved—would die.

But now she was facing up to reality; this wasn't just visions in her head anymore. This was the water supply; this was people; people who were going to get drugged and hurt; some of whom would certainly die when the demons took over and made Sunnydale their own. And the closer her friends got to the truth, the more complicit she became in their downfall. She was actively misleading them now, preventing their discovery of what was to come. Her only goal was to keep her friends alive and, if she was lucky, minimize any collateral damage. She'd made preparations, of course. She'd done what she could.

"What else can I do?" she said aloud in the empty office. Grimly resigned, she continued searching through the engineer's e-mail correspondence. It didn't tell her much more than she'd already learned. She began a keyword search for any relevant files, and started printing out copies of the most pertinent e-mails. The printer whirred to life and she went to stand next to it, watching the sheets as they chugged with mechanical, hypnotizing regularity into the tray.

When the printing was finished, she collected the sheets and turned with them in hand, and then gasped. Paper fell from her hands, fluttering and drifting across the tiles at her feet.

"Who are you?" asked the man in the doorway. "What are you doing in my office?" He was short and slim with a close, not unstylish haircut, and he was squinting at her from behind oblong glasses. Willow's gaze dropped immediately to what was in his hands, but it wasn't a gun. He was holding a...a banana?

"I, I'm, uh--" Her mind skittered wildly, seeking a plausible explanation. "The new secretary?" Even to her own voice that sounded lame.

"No you're not." He moved forward a step, not quite threateningly, but squarely blocking any exit she might try to make.

"No," Willow echoed, growing still as she weighed her options. "I'm not." And she felt herself gathering, the way a storm gathers above a field. A prickling, prescient sensation in the air; an electrical heaviness as the sky charged itself to strike. "You're Cottler?"

"I'm Terry Cottler."

She smiled. It wasn't her nice smile. "Hi, Terry."

He must have seen something in her face. The step he'd taken forward he took back, but she raised her hand casually and the door slammed behind him. She never grew tired of that trick. Or, really, any of the others.
"Don't go," she said, an icing of friendliness over her voice. "I've looked forward to our talk."

Cottler backed up into the corner. "What do you want?"

Shadows were lengthening in the room as in an over-exposed photograph, the contrast of dark and light sharpening, making the man's face stand out with an eerie white glow. It wasn't hard to open yourself up and let the darkness flood in, shadows splashing up against the walls, pouring from the ceiling, a tide rising. What they didn't want you to learn, the jealous writers of books and the watchers and the safe little Wiccans, was that power wanted to flow, even without incantations or offerings. If you made yourself a door, it would open you. Fill you. It flowed into her now, and the release made her giddy. She saw the banana drop from Cottler's hand as if in slow-motion, trailing shadows. Bananas. The funniest of fruits. She smiled a little more broadly.

Truth spells. Who needed truth spells?

"Tell me about the compound," she invited.

"I don't know what you--" And then he cried out, because fire hurt. She watched his face pull into a rictus of pain, break out in a sweat. He was a pale little man, and far too vulnerable to be playing games with her. She was a friend of darkness. He was merely its pawn.

"Tell me about the compound," she repeated, rolling her wrist and hand with sensual awareness, feeling the magic like a potent ache; ready to deliver a second blow.

"I don't know...don't..."

"Oh, come on." She strolled up to him, close enough to dance. Her eyes bored into his from an intimate distance. "Don't make this fun," she said softly. "You don't want me to have fun." She'd come a long way since high school, when pretending to be a vampire felt as disturbing as putting on someone else's skin. Now she knew how to change her own skin, shimmy off one to reveal another. Like a snake.

Cottler swallowed, and his gaze twitched behind his glasses, a little muscle beating at the corner of one eye. "N-no," he stuttered. "I...it's a sedative."

"I know that," she said impatiently.

"W-what do you want to know then?"

She touched his chin lightly and held his gaze. "When are you putting it in the water?"

"They won't tell me until it's time."

The e-mails had suggested that already, but Willow was still disappointed. She believed him. "And where are you keeping it until then?" she asked, stroking his cheek. Touching him was a grotesque affectation and it took all her will not to draw back her hand and wipe it down her shirt, but he looked even more distressed than she felt and that was what mattered. Cottler tried to turn his face away, but she grabbed his chin and jerked it back. "Tell me."

"It's over there," he whispered, moving only his eyes, directing her to the far wall of the office; she followed his gaze to a small, open set of shelves on which sat a coffee maker, mug, stirrers, non-dairy creamer. "Bottom shelf," he said. "Coffee can."

"You've got to be kidding me," she muttered, irritated at him and herself. "Very purloined letter of you, Terry." She released him, but cast a casual, flickering motion of fingers as she walked away.
"Don't go anywhere." His shoulders and arms spasmed back against a bulletin board, paralyzed by her will; she paid no attention. The coffee can was big, economy-sized; but even so the stuff must be incredibly potent if they intended only this much to affect the entire town. She'd thought the formulas outlined in his e-mails might have been off or that she was reading them wrong, but this proved otherwise. It was shocking to see the fate of a town realized in something as modest and ordinary as a coffee can. The compound itself was flaky looking, like laundry detergent, and had no smell.

"Is this all of it?"

"Yes. It's very powerful."

"It would be bad, if you were lying to me," Willow said conversationally, without turning to look at him.

"I'm--I'm not."

Kneeling on the carpet, she thought about what to do. Absently she noticed a cardboard box still on the shelf; she pulled it out and found a second can, this one sealed. Stripping off the lid revealed five innocuous pounds of coffee. Willow shoved it back into place and went to him.

"It's not many people who can say they've sold out the entire human race," she observed, drawing on a cold, scathing tone, working herself up to what needed to be done. "Your mother must be very proud."

Cottler stiffened and his watery eyes suddenly burned at her. "She would be. My mother wasn't human. She was raped by one, though. The bastard probably didn't even know what she was, a Koul-lon-kham, but I've had to hide what I am my entire life. I'm sick of it. I can't wait to see your kind crawl for a change. You'll make great housepets."

His sneer and the utter loathing twisting his face wiped out the momentary pity Willow felt and before she could think to stop herself, she slapped him hard across one cheek. Her voice shook as she spoke. "You think I care about your demon-movie-of-the-week sob story? My friends could die because some creep like you has an identity crisis. Well, boo frickin' hoo. I'm sick of pretending monsters are anything but monsters." She paused to suck in a raw breath, and her holy anger refused to abate. "I should feed this stuff to you and dump you in your own reservoir. That would be poetic justice, don't you think?"

Her captive said nothing, but breathed harder through his nostrils. Willow stared him down, just looking for an excuse to hurt him in some new way. She trembled all over, power threatening to surge and blow her sky-high; what had been a familiar sweetness before was now beginning to make her feel sick. She swallowed once, hard, and made herself unclench her fists.

"You're lucky I've got a generous nature," she said, lifting her chin a notch. "I'm full of love and I'm strong. Stronger than you." She took a breath and raised her hands to each side of his face. She didn't look him in the eye anymore, but closed her own and reached out to the dark spirits who always awaited her call, even when she lacked tools or tokens. "Surasundari, Caligo, Umbria, hear me. I seek you in supplication. I offer my hands to you and my praise."

When they came, it was as if she'd called down lightning and she felt their ferocity and desire, how they'd missed her, like old lovers. Filled with their power, her eyes snapped open blackly and she spoke with flat, level force at the man she held: "Let your plots be played unwitting, the means destroyed in your forgetting; I take the gold and leave the grind, guised as needful in your mind. In sleep forget all intervention, erase this hour and my intention."
As darkness faded from Willow's eyes, Cottler slumped bonelessly against the wall, dragged down by sleep. She left him huddled on the carpet, head cushioned against the side of a chair, and staggered backwards until her hip bumped his desk. Above her, near the ceiling, swirled a knot of restless shadows, like an unkindness of ravens seeking her kiss. She felt around behind her, closed her hand around a pair of scissors, and then drew them out and the blades open.

"Hand to my hand, tool to your power, I give thanks for your gift." She sliced open her left palm, then her right, then let the scissors drop and raised her hands to the forceful lick of their presence. For a moment as they touched her she went rigid, pain her price, but when released her hands were healed and her debt filled. A ritual formality with the Dark Ones, no more.

After all, they liked her.

"Whoo," she breathed, as they dissipated and left her drained in the very mundane confines of Cottler's office, with a sleeping man and a mess of fallen papers. "Head rush." As quickly as she could manage she gathered up the print-outs and tidied any signs of her presence, then took the coffee can of sedative. At the door she paused to glance down at Cottler. She'd used a lot of force on him, but she'd had to. Easy enough to wipe memory; harder to implant a false one and make it reality. At least, harder if you can't afford to take any chances. And she couldn't, not when so much was at stake. But he'd be fine soon, would wake up and mistake coffee grounds for compound, and dump them into the water supply, and lives would be saved.

It was strange, how for a moment she felt so very ancient, like something beyond time trapped in the flesh of a child. But she couldn't regain innocence, and didn't want to. She'd grown up and out of fairy tales. Monsters weren't transformed by a kiss. And sometimes the means did justify the end.

"Willow." Buffy's step quickened. "We were wondering what happened to you."

Willow smiled as she closed Cottler's office door behind her. "Hey, guys."

"My god," said Xander, staring at what she held. "What did I say about caffeine? Would you look at this?" He held out one hand in forthright amazement.

Buffy looked and raised her brows. "Okay, Will? Probably not a good idea to steal the man's coffee. Kinda ruins the whole low-profile thing you were going for."

She smiled at them, and Buffy thought she seemed a bit punchy. "Don't worry. It's okay, really. Guess what this is?"

Xander blinked, not catching on. "A tasty morning pick-me-up?"

"It's the compound," Willow said rather proudly.

"Whooa," said Buffy, spirits lifting further than they had in weeks even as she boggled. "He kept it in a coffee can?" Soon as I get home, I'm moving my money stash, she thought in alarm.
"Man," said Xander, sounding suitably wowed. "How in perdition did you figure that out?"

"Oh, you know." Willow waved a hand. "Logic. Intuition. A few choice clues. It all added up."

"What's this guy going to do when he finds it gone, though?" Xander looked at Buffy. "I mean, what if he just gets more?"

"I exercised a little mojo," Willow said. Buffy reassessed her pale, shadowed face with this new information in mind. "Put a glamour on his coffee. Now the residents of Sunnydale will suffer no more than a slight perkiness." Her smile renewed itself.

"You are da man," said Xander emphatically, shaking his head in admiration. "In a completely non-butch way, I mean."

"Thank you."

Buffy studied her friend, strangely disquieted but unsure why. A little search-and-seizure, a handy spell, and hey, they'd moved one step ahead of the enemy. It was all good. So why did she feel so...uncertain? Maybe because it seemed so surprisingly easy. "That's great, Will," she said, forcing down her doubts. "Score one for the home team. And for Wicca power."

Willow's smile might have soured a little, it was hard to tell, but Buffy definitely felt herself being read with closer attention. "Yeah," she said in a steady tone, holding Buffy's eyes. "Go us."

"I just wish we could have found out when this was all going down." Buffy shifted, put her hands in her back pockets.

"Hey," said Xander. "Maybe we could follow him? Except, no, because he's going to be inside the building when he makes his move. Damn." He frowned in thought.

"We can't expect everything to fall in our laps," said Willow a bit sharply, then took a visibly deep breath, shoulders moving. She stepped away from the door. "We should probably get out of here."

"Yeah." Xander glanced down the lab. "Good idea. Before the triumphant raiding party falls prey to guard dogs and golems."

"Golems?" asked Buffy, as they walked side by side out of the lab.

"It's late," said Xander by way of explanation.

Buffy's step almost faltered as memory closed a circuit. "Later than you think," she said automatically.

"What?" And she looked up to find Xander smiling, puzzled, and Willow looking her way with sharp, closed eyes that Buffy could no longer see behind.

"Nothing," she said. And the dream began with familiar steps, but somehow she thought this was becoming very real.

The End
Chapter End Notes

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
Thursday, October 30

**Buffy** had a growing pile of butterflies in her hands. They disturbed her; she kept half-expecting them to flutter to life, stiff wood turning to wings against her skin. Ever since Ilwyn's reign, when she'd often find the magicked creatures softly skimming around her bedroom, she hadn't looked at them in quite the same way. She'd left them hanging on the walls until now, unmoved to make changes, but she was ready to put them away for good. She'd already bought some nice prints to take their place.

Placing the butterflies in a box, it occurred to her that Dawn might want them. And maybe the kitty-cat letter holder--she'd always liked it when she was little. Buffy would ask. Dawn couldn't have the stuffed animals though, she decided, picking a small plush pig out of the box and stroking its back. You couldn't pass down your childhood menagerie to a seventeen year-old kid sister; they wouldn't be properly appreciated. Used for trashcan basketball, more likely. No. They'd go into the basement for safe storage. Even if she didn't want them in her room anymore, they were hers; the friends of her girlhood. Mister Gordo. Mara the Monkey Girl. Teditha Bear. A grubby bunch, but maybe if she had a kid someday, a little girl--maybe she could clean them up.

Holding Mister Gordo, Buffy remembered that Angel's hands had once held him too. Nostalgia touched her for a moment and then she felt ridiculous. Stuffed pig. Vampire. Young love. These were not associations a mature woman should cling to. She put the stuffed animal carefully back in the box, tucking him down in one corner, before turning to inspect the progress being made on her walls. Xander was on a stepladder with his back to her, smoothing out another panel of wallpaper. And as her eyes traveled up along his back, along one outstretched arm, she felt a niggling sense of something wrong. Pale blue shirt, rolled up to show his forearms. His hands on the wall. Blue shirt, vast blue wall--

"Oh my god," Buffy said, face twisting in sudden, intense distaste. Xander looked back over one shoulder questioningly. "Why did I pick this color? It's like being in the pocket of someone's stonewashed jeans."

"Hey, denim's a perfectly fine statement of seventies cultural nostalgia. We'll scatter some felt patches around, a few psychedelic daisies." Xander broke off his air sketches when he saw her expression, and climbed down from the ladder. "I'm kidding. It's fine, Buffy. It's a nice shade of blue, like..." He paused, staring at the wall, obviously striving for an alternative and coming up blank.

Tara walked in holding a can of paint, looked from Xander to Buffy. "What's up?"

"My wall is denim," said Buffy pitifully, gaze fixed on the new paper.

"No, it's...it's not," Tara assured her, stumbling only a little over the words. She tilted her head and studied the wall. "It's cadet blue."

"How militaristic of me."
Xander wiped his hands on a cloth. "If you don't want it, not a problem, Buff. I can strip those suckers right back off before they dry. " His voice was untroubled, patient, and utterly kind, and Buffy felt a terrible desire to squish him into a hug.

"No. I mean, it'll be okay. I liked it in the store, right?" Her voice rose to a hopeful waver on the last remark.

"It'll be great," said Tara, setting down the paint. Tension seemed to lurk at the edge of her smile, making Buffy feel guilty even though the other woman had volunteered for redecoration duty with true Martha Stewart spirit. She probably had plenty more important things she could be spending her time on.

Well, of course she did.

"It's so nice of you guys to do all this," said Buffy, manners prompted by sincere appreciation. "Thank you. And, look, any time you guys want to cut out of here--"

"What?" drawled Xander, feigning amazement as he grabbed a cold soda. "And go to work, where they make you wear plastic yellow hats and pee off fifty-foot girders?" He smiled and then went glaze-eyed before taking a swig.

Buffy arched her brows. "Yes, and those waterproof hats make a lot more sense now." Then her face softened again. "But seriously, you shouldn't be wasting your vacation days on this."

"Nah," he said. "It's great to get away. Ever since Tony threw out his back, he's been ripping new ones right and left. And by 'ones' I don't mean backs," he clarified dryly. "The whole crew's crabby as a pod of Blugmar demons during hunting season." He cocked his head and blinked in self-contemplation. "I'm out of touch with the common simile, aren't I?"

"Well, you're definitely calling long distance," Tara agreed, re-stacking a pile of boxes by the door. "Do you want me to take these downstairs?" she asked Buffy.

"Sure, thanks. They're all pretty light. Clothes and stuff." Watching Tara leave with a carton in hand, Buffy thought of ways to reward her more tangibly later--cookie baking, maybe--then moved closer to Xander. "You're a life-saver with all this," she said, rolling one shoulder to indicate the half-stripped, half-papered wall. "On my own, I'd have papered the carpet really well."

"No sweat." Xander squeezed her shoulder, then rubbed it gently, with the affection of years of friendship, lunacy faced, battles survived. The gesture made her weirdly shy and self-conscious, though, a touch so ordinary that it called up every longing for family and every atom of solitude defining her, things she couldn't even put into words, and after a moment, Xander seemed to sense her awkwardness and let his hand drop.

"So," she said, casting around for a different subject. "You and Anya heading out Saturday?"

"Yeah. Drive up the coast, get lost, crash in cheap motels. We're hoping to find the kind with the shaking beds."

He sounded happy and satisfied--looked happy and satisfied--and Buffy smiled. "Don't they call those 'magic fingers'?"

"Don't tell her that. I'm afraid it might creep her out. Or, worse, the absence of fingers might actually disappoint her." He shook his head wryly, but Buffy could read the love in his eyes as he thought of Anya. Something in her chest constricted, and she wasn't sure why happiness and envy
felt so much alike. She swallowed, ducked her head.

"I'd better check and see how Dawn's doing," she said. "Make sure she's not painting over the windows."

She threaded her way through the furniture in the hall, bookcases and chairs and dressers, and entered her sister's room. She really shouldn't have let Dawn stay home from school, but things were going so well it seemed okay to make an exception. Good grades, no fights, no calls from teachers about smart-alecky comments or cutting class. Nothing to complain about in months. At this point, Buffy had to admit that her sister's school record was looking more promising than her own ever had. It was one less worry.

Xander had made short work of Dawn's room, stripping the walls and repapering them in five hours, breakfast to lunch. The pink flowered pattern was a bit claustrophobic and not something Buffy would have chosen, but Dawn had beamed contentedly when she saw the results. Now she was sitting on the floor, leaning down to paint trim with painstaking care.

"Newspapers," Buffy reminded her, picking up a handful as she walked in and tossing them down next to her sister.

Dawn sighed and set her brush down across the open paint can. "I'm being very careful," she said. In less forgiving moments, Buffy would have called that a whine.

"You're making spots you can't even see, trust me."

"If you can't see them, what difference does it make?" Dawn snarked.

"It's the principle of it, Buffy told herself. And then: Oh god, I've become mom again. It was a familiar and bittersweet thought, responsibility warring against a horror of sensible shoes and square pocketbooks and wallets that weren't fat with money but with all those extra slots and folders for credit cards you could never pay off and business cards of people who couldn't help you and the checkbook that never balanced.

She took a deep breath.

"Just do it," she said, firmly but not unkindly. As Dawn complied, Buffy inspected the contents of a box on a nearby chair. Framed photographs were heaped on top: their unbroken family gathered together; a six year-old Dawn grinning in a fairy suit for Halloween; Joyce Summers in a summer dress, a flower in her hand.

"Huh, this is weird," said Dawn. Buffy looked up to see her reading a section of newspaper, a scrunchy frown on her face.

"What?"

"It says that seven school buses have been stolen from the municipal district parking lot."

"Seven?" said Buffy, startled.

"And they say it's part of a 'rash of thefts' sweeping Sunnydale. Along with, um, 'thefts of munitions from the Ellsworth Army Base.' What are munitions?"

"Guns and stuff," said Buffy absently. "Let me see that." She took the paper from Dawn and sat down on the bed to read.
"Why are thefts always a 'rash'?' Dawn wondered aloud. "It's never a deadly virus of thefts, or a fungal infection of thefts." She realized after a moment she was being ignored, and returned to work with an ostentatious sigh.

Buffy was focused on the article. School buses, munitions, and a bulldozer were among the items recently stolen from around town. It was freaky, and she couldn't help but think there was some connection to the water supply thing, yet another hint of the invasion that might be coming. Even just the word 'municipal' was enough to make her uneasy these days. She took the paper back to her room and gave it to Xander with the command, "Read this."

He took the newspaper and read. "Huh," he said.

"Munitions, school buses, a bulldozer." Buffy paced as best as she could through the jumbled chaos of her room. "These thefts have got to be connected to the invasion. I don't know why or how. I mean, guns, okay. But the other stuff...it's just that hincky feeling I get. My hinck is all itchy...what is a hinck, anyway?"

"Yeah," Xander said slowly. "I've been thinking about that. Invasion, not hinck." Something in his tone arrested her attention. "Like, what are the odds that they're only interested in the water supply? You've got your gas, electric, phones--if you're going to take over a town, it seems like a good idea to hit all of those. Cut the power, control all communications--it makes sense. Strategically." His face had grown grim.

"God." Stock still, Buffy tried to wrap her mind around the implications. Her world was so weird sometimes, and she should be used to it, but now and then it grabbed her by surprise and shook her. In the midst of everyday life--painting a room, hanging with friends--

"You know, we never get to just coast," she said. "I know it's an old refrain. But it never stops. Invasions, saving the world, municipal utilities. And it's not like we can call up the phone company and say, 'Hey, some demons might be cutting your lines soon. Can you get someone on that?''' There was no authority to turn to, was what she didn't quite say.

"Well," said Xander, tossing down the paper. "At least we can be sure they won't strike right away. What with tomorrow being Halloween and all." He seemed to hear his own words a beat after he spoke them and met her eyes with dawning alarm.

Anxiety kicked Buffy in the gut, and she tensed. "Right. Great," she said. "Because there's never any trouble on Halloween."

And they stood thinking about that for a good long while as the irony dried around them.

"Hey," Willow said, spotting Buffy as she came in the front door. "How goes the makeover?" She set her books down on the hall table and smiled, trying to convey sunny enthusiasm.

Buffy, bucket and rags in hand, smiled perfunctorily back. "Great." As her expression faded she flicked a fast, casual and somehow distancing glance down Willow, hair to shoes. She might just have been checking out Willow's rediscovery of plaid, but that one cool look recalled a hundred
others given in the halls of Sunnydale High by Cordelia and Harmony and the other alpha girls who'd made Willow feel every inch a geek. Suddenly very conscious of her funky lesbo witchy self, she remembered that this was not her home. No matter how long she lived here, she sometimes felt she took a liberty just opening the door without knocking. They were friends and Willow knew she was needed and wanted and loved. But there was also a flinty judge in Buffy who stood aloof, measuring and ruling. Tension had sprung up between them again since their visit to the water filtration plant. It was as if Buffy suspected something, even though Willow had given her no reason to. Slayer intuition, maybe.

It was dangerous for them both.

"My last class of the day is over," said Willow. "I'm ready to put on my rubber gloves and, um, do I need rubber gloves for this?" She winced winsomely.

"Not really. I was going to sweep out some of the cobwebs, wipe down the woodwork. I don't really need help right now. If there were other things you wanted to work on...." Buffy trailed off with a meaningful look that Willow had no trouble reading: if you want to work on the prophecy you've completely failed to translate.

"Okay," said Willow. She ended up saying it to Buffy's retreating back as her friend climbed the stairs, and her smile dropped away into resigned unhappiness. She wasn't sure how much more of this she could take, all the sneaking and lying while everyone whispered to each other about how incredibly useless she'd become, which they had to be doing because hello, she looked like a big loser, didn't she.

As she walked to the kitchen, Tara came up from the basement. "Hey," she said. "How did you do on your cultural studies paper?"

In the kitchen, Willow fixed them both iced teas. "I got a B," she said casually while she poured. "But then I traded sexual favors and got it bumped up to an A."

"Doctor Magill is a very attractive man," Tara pretended to concede agreeably.

"Actually, he wants me to submit it as a journal article, to Camera Obscura maybe, or one of the other pomo, lit-crit, cult-stud rags." Some of her excitement surfaced despite her attempt to sound blasé.

"That's wonderful, sweetie." Pride infused Tara's face. "You're going to be a published scholar. I'm dating a real academic now." She smiled, then adopted a serious expression. "You'll have to wear tweed, of course. And glasses. Wire-rimmed."

Willow leaned on the counter, grinning. "When I was five, I thought school would be like Oxford, with dons, and everyone wearing robes. I pictured myself running across the quad, late for class, my robe flying out behind me." She paused, said confidingly: "I was a tad precocious. And I was so disappointed when my mom told me we just went in regular clothes. I had this witch's costume from Halloween, and one day I wore it to school." Memory tumbled her back. "Xander was so sweet. When Billy Morehead made fun of me at the bus-stop, Xander pushed him down and sat on him."

"How long did you get to wear your robe?" Tara asked.

"Until recess." Willow sighed. "Then the teacher made me take it off." She pouted a bit, thinking of her stifled dreams and thwarted ambitions.
"We should celebrate."

Willow raised her brows. "That's kind of an odd thing to celebrate."

Tara's lips turned up at the corners, and her eyes might have been twinkling. "Your article, silly."

"Maybe we'd better wait. I'm not published yet. I wouldn't want to jinx it." She straightened up, took both of Tara's hands in her own. "But hey. We don't need an excuse to celebrate, do we? We could celebrate, um, us. The usness of us." Before the world comes crashing down around our heads, she thought.

"I'd celebrate that," Tara said. When the moment passed and the link of their hands fell naturally apart, she added, "Listen, what are you doing now?"

"Now? Nothin'." Willow pushed up her shoulders in a loose shrug, rocked in place. "Now I'm in the now. Ready for anything." She gave Tara a suggestive look, but Tara's earnest expression didn't alter.

"I thought we could work on the prophecy translation together."

"Oh," said Willow, feeling her face fall.

"I think I might have some new--I mean, I don't know for sure, but I've had some ideas. Which are a, a little c-crazy, you'll probably say, but I thought--" She hesitated, words breaking up and set adrift by old uncertainties, almost plaintive. But she was smart and it was quite possible she'd finally dredged some real meaning from the text. Willow swallowed at the thought.

"Sure. We should look at what you've found."

And Willow followed her out of the kitchen, gaze on the back of her lover's head, wondering just how far she'd go to keep Tara safe.

Elapsing time is a trick. When you're in a trance, the bridge from one moment to the next can carry you a distance of hours. Any altered state of consciousness can bend time into funny shapes, stretch it out or twist it down like the Shrinky Dinks you used to make as a kid. From the first steps into the dining room, Willow had felt time go out of joint. She could hear reverberations upstairs of footsteps on carpet, Tara's voice a lulling buzz of words, her own thudding heartbeat and rasp of breath. Time was passing too slowly; time was catching up too fast.

"...looking at the key word in the prophecy, kveffnyk-katuuri-jvetai-au. And then I thought, what if it is a key, in a more literal sense, one that's meant to unlock the text. The Nacirans liked puzzles and puns and codes, which I didn't even know until I researched their..."

Willow clenched her own knees under the table, her hands rigid and aching; itching even, with the unspent energy that gathered inside her, fueled by rising panic.

"...noticed patterns in the text..."
Tara was so smart. All that modesty and generosity obscured her intelligence even from herself, but if any proof was needed, this was it. Willow only half listened to the inevitable words which held no surprise for her; watching instead the play of light along Tara's hair, the moving curves of her lips.

"...numeric code, I realized there was a pun referencing a chapter of another, earlier work. A book of Fenwhar's on demon races." She tilted her head to look directly at Willow, who forced herself from her daze to pay attention. "I looked for the book but couldn't find it. Which really didn't surprise me. Since if I could figure out this translation after eight weeks, you must have been able to figure it out in half the time." Her eyes were steady, calm.

Willow froze, mouth hanging slightly open in an unspent gasp. She immediately checked to see if anyone else was within earshot, but lilting voices were floating down from the second floor along with distant, masculine laughter, so discordant with the subject at hand that it made Willow feel almost ill. She'd been played--maybe Tara's nervousness hadn't been faked, but it hadn't been her old self-doubt either. She'd maneuvered Willow exactly where she wanted her. And Willow had no defenses.

"I," she whispered. "I didn't..." But looking into her lover's eyes, there was no way she could complete her denial. "You don't understand," she said.

"I understand that you lied to me. To all of us. And I'd like to know why." Tara's eyes had picked up a hard gloss.

"Not here," said Willow quickly, as gleeful shouts from Dawn were heard upstairs.

They went into the backyard and sat under the jacaranda tree. It didn't escape Willow's notice that Tara perched as far away as she could on the painted metal bench with her hands tightly clasped in her lap. An untouchable wariness defined her pose. Inside the house, Xander passed by the window of Buffy's room, wallpaper in hand, unreachable and far away, small as the image on a postage stamp; while around them outside, birds chittered in the trees and two dogs barked at differing pitch. Somewhere a door banged, and Tara said nothing.

"I did translate the scroll, but I couldn't say anything," Willow began nervously. "I had visions. I saw what would happen if I told anyone the truth about the prophecy. It's...it's bad, Tara. What's coming, it's the worst thing we've ever faced. But if I told Buffy and the others, we'd die."

Tara's face sharpened in focus, but confusion brushed her features the way her lashes brushed her cheeks. "Die?"

Willow looked down at her hands, twisting in her lap like a mirror of Tara's. "All the visions were different, but they ended the same--we fought the demon invasion, and every time we tried harder. New solutions, bigger, more ambitious. But every time we lost. And we died. All of us. Buffy, Giles, Xander, Dawn...you. Everyone." Her voice felt scratchy and thin, but she kept grief in check. "I couldn't tell you what I'd found. If I had, the visions would have come true. No matter what I did, we failed."

"Oh, sweetie." Tara's shoulders lost some of their rigidity.

"I was so afraid, Tara." Tears brimmed unshed in Willow's eyes, hot and full. "I've been so afraid and I couldn't tell you or Buffy or anyone, and you've all been so disappointed in me, and Buffy's angry and you hate me--" The tears spilled, and she rubbed the heel of one hand roughly across her cheeks, unburdened relief mixing with shame. Her nerves had been drawn so tight for so long, and now they were snapping one by one. Much more of this and she'd be unstrung, incapable of speech.
"I don't hate you. God, Will." Tara scooted a little closer and rested a hand on her knee. "I just wish you'd told me. You shouldn't have been trying to keep this to yourself."

"I couldn't take a chance," Willow cried in her own defense. "Anything I did or said might have changed things."

"What's going to happen?" Tara said with a low, blossoming urgency. "And when?"

"I don't know when. But the invasion...it's going to be bad. Demons and vampires and humans working together, taking over Sunnydale. Maybe...maybe other places too. They've got armies and..." She hesitated as Tara looked back wide-eyed. "Spike, he's one of them. He goes over to their side. He's going to betray us. That's why I've been all bitter girl lately. I know what he's going to do."

"My god," said Tara. "Are you--are you sure? Maybe he--"

"I'm sure." Willow's lips tightened briefly. "I saw him in uniform, leading them."

"I can't believe it." Tara looked torn between anger and anguish. "He's been trying so hard."

"Not hard enough." What she really thought was not at all. Tara gave Spike far more credit than anyone else, but contradicting her generous optimism right now was pointless. She'd see the truth for herself all too soon. At least now that Tara knew what was coming, Willow had someone on her side. Knowledge shared was a greater risk, but god, she didn't want to be alone again with the future and her fears. Even if only one person knew she wasn't a failure and a vicious shrew, it propped up her flagging spirit.

"Have you told Giles about any of this?" Tara asked. "Maybe he could help."

"We can't tell anyone," Willow said with emphasis. "Trying to stop it--that's what gets us killed."

Tara digested this. "What are we going to do then?"

"I don't know," Willow admitted. "I've been trying to prepare, but--" She broke off, swallowing, and met Tara's worried eyes. "I don't know."

In the next yard, a child laughed and raced in circles on the lawn, a dog yipping at his heels. Willow and Tara turned their heads at the same moment to watch through the picket fence. The sun was descending, sending needles of orange light between the houses and trees. A very still, heavy luminosity filled the air, outlining a towering date palm and red tiled roofs in the distance. A woman came out onto the back porch and called, "Robin!" The boy ran to her, arms outstretched, jacket nearly falling off. She buttoned it for him, gave a kiss, and loosed him again to play.

"She shouldn't leave him alone this close to sunset," Tara said as the woman returned inside.

Willow watched the child tumble to the ground under the dog's leaping fur. Everything she hadn't done and everything she might still do were playing out to stalemate. She'd invited the visions and for this she'd have to bear witness. The scene next door was just another reminder of everything that would be lost. As she watched, her face felt as if it had melted and refrozen like ice cream; a cool, tear-stiffened mask. "Soon," she said.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tara look her way. "Soon what?"

"Soon it's not even going to matter."
"This year, things are a little different," said Buffy. She glanced around the living room at her friends. In the know, Xander had his head down, shoulders hunched. The others made an attentive audience.

"We always hear that nothing supernatural happens on Halloween and every year some new baddie gets a bug up his butt and decides not to play by the rules." Half expecting someone to bring up Spike's rap sheet, she paused to dare them, but no remark came. "We know some mega-evil's rising in Sunnydale. We don't know when. But the slaying biz has been busier than usual this past week--our native demons are getting restless, and Halloween is looking pretty good in the betting pool right now."

"Is there really a pool?" Anya whispered to Xander. He shook his head gently, and disappointment filled her pout.

"We'll patrol at full strength tonight," Buffy continued. "Keep your eyes open for anything out of the ordinary--even for Sunnydale." She saw Tara and Willow exchange a glance, but neither woman spoke. "I don't even know what to tell you to look for, other than our fedora-wearin' friends. Oh, and stolen school buses. And a bulldozer." She paused and gave up on it. "Just be sharp. Xander and Anya will be hitting the demon bars. Willow, Tara--you guys are on street duty. I'll be covering the graveyards with Spike. If I can find him," she added.

It took all Buffy's willpower not to look at Willow; she was afraid her temper might betray her if she did. Spike had vanished since that scene in the Magic Box, and it was beginning to freak her out. Only regular trips to his crypt reassured her that he hadn't left town; she'd found changes of identical clothes strewn across the bed, the reserve of stocked blood lowering day by day in the fridge. But no Spike.

"What about me?" asked Dawn hopefully.

"We need you here," said Buffy. "Everyone's going to be checking in on the hour."

Dawn's face wavered between resentment and self-importance, before the first won out. "Have you people ever heard of cell phones?" she asked snippily.

"Come on," Xander chided, "you know how bad service on the Hellmouth is."

Dawn sniffed. "Mine works fine. Mostly. Except between three and four in the morning, which is...uh, totally theoretical."

"We also need you here to pass out candy," Buffy said with a pointed look, cutting short the debate. "The rest of us will meet back here at one to debrief."

"That's a late night," Anya grumbled.
Buffy lifted her brows. "If we save the world, we can sleep in."

The streets of Sunnydale thronged with costumed kids who made Buffy smile: tiny trolls and giggling witches and princesses in taffeta, so short she kept stumbling to avoid them when they blundered around hedges, heads down as they checked their loot. Pirates with eyebrow-pencil mustaches and plastic hooks bumped along next spacemen like they'd wandered out of their stories and gotten lost. It was a big load of cuteness, but it was the innocence that Buffy really saw. Wind rattled the leaves in the trees, and the kids hurried excitedly along the sidewalks, candy-heavy bags slapping their shins, parents in tow. It was the adults who looked spooked, their flashlights already switched on despite the lingering sunset, eyes unconsciously darting to every bush. Any town resident old enough to smoke developed a gift for selective memory, a certain glaze-eyed obliviousness to the evil surrounding them; but at times like this you could see how living on the Hellmouth stripped its inhabitants' nerves.

Buffy slowed her pace as she neared the center of town, mapping her territory and trying to see even more clearly than usual what hid beneath the surface, like dirt under a shiny, painted nail. Downtown was busy; Halloween just another Friday night to the puberty set and all the people she still vaguely classified as 'grown-ups'. Couples strolled arm-in-arm on their way from pubs to theaters, or sat in clusters at the Espresso Pump with coffees warming their hands. A nip was in the air, and the sky had fallen into dusk. Buffy scanned faces young and old and inbetween, most of them pale. Not vamp pale, but still pretty monochrome for southern California, and that might have been noteworthy, if she hadn't long ago stopped noticing that the Hellmouth was a white-toned, upscale town, whose populations of color (as Giles once put it) had largely fled--either that or been thinned from existence by vampiric feeding. No one had ever been able to say for sure.

When Buffy met people's eyes, they looked away as if by habit or instinct. No one wanted to look at her too closely, to really see her. She was known to the town, and she wasn't known at all, and usually she was happy with that strange double-vision. Only a few of the bolder guys tried to hold her stare. Some of them even had girlfriends. Skeeves. Were guys ever not on the make?

Pay attention, Buffy reminded herself. Find the ones who don't fit. But of the faces bobbing by her in the dusk, all looked human, no vamps or obvious demons. No one in sight posed a threat, yet she kept tensing for attack. In front of the drugstore, Groucho Marx teased a gaggle of girls with his unlit cigar and their shrieks made her jump; and at the arcade, a line of high school boys leaned against the wall, flaunting their letterman jackets. When they whistled at her, she shivered. Coming toward her, a fortysomething couple took up most of the sidewalk, swinging their joined hands and humming; behind them a family edged along in single-file with grim expressions. They could all be demons, Buffy thought, demons of Way Too Much Cheer, demons of Big Grumpiness. Demons of Testosterone and Inane Tweeny Shrieking.

Of course, it was probably just her overactive imagination.

At the little theater where she'd seen her one and only film with Angel, where she'd never yet managed to see a film with Spike, the marquee half-heartedly spelled out the starring role of the new Arnold Schwarzenegger film ("Arnold Schwarznggr"). Its ticket line stretched down the block, though, and as Buffy passed by in the opposite direction, faces turned her way one by one:
carefully blank eyes, expressions smoothed free of interest. And then a big whoop echoed down the street, some frat boy calling to his pals, and all those white faces leaned out a little at the spectacle, hanging to one side like blossoms on a lily-of-the-valley.

Nothing strange. Nothing at all. At least, no one looked suspicious or out of place, and Buffy had no way of guessing what secrets they held. You couldn't look at Dawn, for instance, and tell she was an ex-Key. Or still a Key. Buffy wasn't entirely clear on that. But either way, little sister proved that some secrets defied casual scrutiny. As did Anya, Willow—even Spike when he wanted to blend. And it occurred to her suddenly that maybe they should be thinking outside the box. Why sit around waiting for the axe or the big stinky shoe to fall? There were surely spells that could help; give them visions or let them pin-point magical forces at work in town. Because this—this wandering randomly and peering down alleys—wasn't likely to get them anywhere.

No fedoras, school buses, bulldozers.

When Buffy arrived at the first cemetery on her rounds, it was almost completely dark under the spread of the trees. She headed straight for Spike's crypt, entered in a no-nonsense way and descended. Empty. Of course. "Spike," she called to the corners and shadows. "I know you're here." She didn't really. His place felt as empty as it looked, but she didn't entirely trust her slayer sense with him. She looked around, picked up a few caseless CDs. "Spike, say bye-bye to 'Love Bites' and, uh, 'London Calling.' I'm about to snap them in two. I mean, four." She waited, but there was no answer.

"It's been a week. Don't you think this is getting childish?" She put the CDs back down and wandered to the bed. A blue shirt lay there and she examined it, discovering Freddy Krueger-like rips down the front, and a spray of stiffly dried orange stuff that had to be demon's blood, but looked more like that fake cheese they poured on nachos.

She frowned and put the shirt down, then checked the blood supply. "Well, you're drinking," she muttered. A few empty blood packs on the top of his fridge confirmed it, their drained skins resting next to an equally drained bottle of Maker's Mark. "And drinking." She sighed and made to leave.

"I'm going now," she called as she paused near the ladder. "Off to patrol and possibly be killed in a horrible, permanent way. Or maimed. Might even lose a foot." Her tone was faux thoughtful and upbeat: "Could be whipped in the face with a stinky demon tail, go blind, lose my ability to slay. Live out my life as special-needs girl, doddering around the Magic Box until the day I keel over into the dried sage."

When no response came, Buffy felt frustrated and oddly deflated. She'd depressed herself with that last scenario, and he really wasn't here. Wasn't lurking or listening or watching. The emptiness was merely empty, and she was...

She was late for patrol.

Entering the next graveyard on her rounds, Buffy blinked in surprise and paused. She'd wanted to find some sign of weirdness this Halloween, and she'd found it. Right out in the open among the
graves sprawled a bevy of demons with horns and long twitchy tails. One was strumming 'Lay Lady, Lay' on a guitar and croaking the words rather better than Dylan; the rest listened in various reclining poses on the grass or on tattered blankets. A bottle of wine was being passed around and what might have been a joint. Nearby on the grass sat an inflated sea-monster, like toddlers used in swimming pools.

Buffy boggled for a moment. And then she walked up to them and folded her arms. "I realize you've got this whole unwashed, unplugged, and generally unsavory scene going on here, but just what do you think you're doing?" She would not ask about the sea-monster. Would not.

"Slayer, right?" said a purple, lizardy, and somehow very feminine demon. "Pull up a patch of grass, honey. Get your funky self down with the new world order."

She crossed her arms tighter. "First? Snowball. Hell. And second, what do you know about a 'new world order'?"

Words that sounded so crisp and commanding to her didn't seem to impress her audience. A blue lizard with yellow spots frowned. "They do have snowballs in Hell, you know. One of the hells, I mean." His tail waved in a whateveresque way. "Some are pretty cold. You can get in some good skiing."

"I was there once," a third demon reminisced.

"Where?" asked his friend.

"Aspen. For the film festival."

"Cold?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

Buffy, who'd never been to Aspen, grew irritable and began squinting suspiciously at what the lizards were puffing. Lately her war on demons had started to resemble a war on drugs. At least schoolkids wouldn't be tempted to shop a stash from giant hippie newts. God, she hoped not. "That isn't jackweed, is it?" Then she tensed with a moment's self-doubt. "And you are lizards, right? I mean," she gestured with her stake, "Big, mouthy demon-lizards in spring-fashion colors?" She wondered which was more likely to lie, a demon or a hallucination.

"No way," said the spotted lizard.

"What?" She grew briefly anxious.

"It's just a clove cigarette, honey." Purple lizard held the smoking roll up for examination. "But if you're selling...."

"What?" Buffy repeated in a more dangerous tone.

"Jackweed. Got any?"

"No," she said, feeling the conversation getting away from her.

"Cocoa?" asked the spotty one.

"No."

"Gorash bile?"
"Do I look like I have bile? Don't answer that."

"Altoids?"

"I'm going to kill you all now," Buffy announced, brandishing her stake.

"Peace, Slayer. Find your second chakra. We're just celebrating the dawn of a new age." Despite his apparent calm, Buffy thought the spotty lizard's eyes held a spark of nastiness. "The rise of the underclass. The revolution, baby. Change is on the wind."

"Funny," said Buffy, tilting her head to one side. "I don't feel a breeze." She raised her stake an inch higher. "Unless you mean the one I'm going to make when I ventilate you...if you don't tell me everything you know about this revolution."

"You hugged your mattress lately, girl?" asked the purple demon. "Cause that attitude's harsh."

Buffy didn't deign to answer, just gave her a cool, slitted look.

"Aw, we don't know nothin'," the guitar player said. "Word is there'll be wars and rumors of wars and all that jazz. No one's got more to say than that." His lips grew a rude smile, revealing some broken fangs. "Whatever's comin' sure sounds fun, though."

Buffy narrowed her eyes and said grimly, "Yeah, but I'm here now, and I don't think you'd like my idea of fun. So hold your be-in somewhere else, or I'll make you not to be."

The demons exchanged glances, then rose lazily and gathered their things. The spotted demon, last to join his straggling companions, paused and turned to Buffy. "You might want to be nicer, Slayer. You never know when the worm's gonna turn."

Bemused, she watched him walk off, tail swishing across the grass, and thought about turning worms. Her mother used to say that too. And now...this was the graveyard where her mother was buried. Buffy nearly always came here first on her patrols, to make sure the grave remained undesecrated, and because it was one of the town's more restless haunts, its plots barely half-filled. She paid her visit, dragging her steps down the broad avenues. Near her mother's plot, the trees thinned and the graves grew quieter, more tenured. Her mother's headstone was a pale familiar beacon in the distance. She found it well tended; she never had to do anything—never had to pull a single weed or clear out trash—and almost resented this.

What did clutter the headstone, Buffy left alone: the tiny sticks left by burnt incense, the melted candles, the marigolds and salt and bread. The bread hadn't been touched by birds yet. He'd been here recently, then, doing his thing, whatever that was exactly. Not long after her mother's death, at some forgotten occasion when Buffy had been too weak to deny a visit, Spike had shared all kinds of colorful rituals of the dead with Dawn, who'd immediately wanted to place a photo of their mother by the grave in memoriam. But in Sunnydale it was too risky to leave such a talisman out for the taking. You don't want some bogeyman walkin' around with your mum's picture in his filthy pocket, he'd said. Would stir up ideas. Power the mojo. You let me worry about it, Bit. I'll protect her. 'S what I do. Take care of the dead. Since the livin' won't let me. And he'd looked at Buffy over Dawn's bent head, getting his jabs in even then.

But he'd kept his promise. Looked after her. No one had ever dared disturb her mother's grave, not in all this time.

Buffy kissed her fingers and reached out to touch the cool surface of the headstone, then stiffened as her ears picked up the not-stealthy-enough vibrations of approaching feet. Many feet. She began
turning. "I thought I told you to--" And stopped for one brief moment before grabbing her stake. Counted four vamps and two demons, and sensed more behind her. Vamps and demons together. Weirdness. Bad weirdness. They weren't the demons from before; these were uglier, bigger. Greener.

"Slayer," said the lead vamp with a menacing grin. He wore a Lemonheads tee-shirt and ratty jeans, but a lot of muscle propped up those clothes. The muscle was somehow confusing; the tee-shirt and the lower half of his face oddly familiar.

"Todd?" she asked. "Todd Pendergrast?" Amazement colored her voice.

"Uh...hey," said Todd, a sheepish smile replacing his unmenacy menace. He glanced at his pals, hunched his shoulders a little at their glares.

"Oh my god--you've been working out. You used to be so weedy. Like, record-store-clerk level weedy. I can't believe how ripped you are now." She reached out and casually felt up one arm, which he flexed proudly before ducking his head and scuffing one boot on the grass. They both ignored the low growls from the other vamps.

"Yeah, hey," said Todd. "Thanks for noticing. Really. It means a lot, 'cause, man, I didn't even think you knew my name or nothin'. You never looked at me in high school. No one did. But everything's changed. Ever since I died, I've got this whole regimen--" But sadly, Buffy never learned what it was, because she grew bored and he exploded into a big cloud of dust.

Unsurprisingly, the others took that as their signal to attack. Buffy twisted through the swarm with a duck and a roll, taking the fight away from her mom's grave and repositioning herself to get a better idea of what she was up against. There were still four vamps--another had joined from the rear, along with two more demons of some different species. A nicely integrated team, but way more than she wanted to play. These thoughts flashed by in a second as she spun and kicked one of the vamps back and staked what might have been his girlfriend. Well, love was a tragedy.

Seven to go, but they were on her in force now, and Buffy kept them at bay only with increasing effort. It was probably time to run, but they'd encircled her and she'd have to punch a hole in that wall, and hey, she had no problem with that, but whenever she got close to one, her opponent would dance back and the others would close in, and damn it. All those stupid jokes she'd made in Spike's crypt were coming back like acid reflux and scaring the hell out of her.

"Screw this," she said and leapt at one of the demons, slamming him to the ground and springing over him in a back-flip to land clear of the fray. She took off at once, beelining for the cemetery gates. She could hear her attackers thudding behind her, laughing and cat-calling. One mocked her with the name 'mighty chicken girl' and she almost turned in outrage, but managed to ignore the bait. Her rep could take a few knocks if it meant she lived even just one more day.

She'd nearly made it out when something huge and heavy landed on her back, bull-dozer ing her face-first into the sod. Her stake went flying, and Buffy bucked her assailant off and rolled to one side. Up on her feet again, she deflected the next two vamps bent on bringing her down and then lunged for the stake, but the first vamp beat her to it. She whirled to kick a demon and then another and another. Adrenaline was shooting through her veins, her gut clenching. Completely on the defensive now, she could barely even focus; couldn't strategize, only react. Blows fell, kicks met their targets--but not all were her blows and kicks. Something sharp grazed the edge of her cheek, barely missing her eye, and she felt the hot sting of blood.

Damn it, she wouldn't go down like this, not--
--covered in dust, which she shook out of her eyes to see Spike laying into another vamp like a mad thing, fangs bared as he snarled, duster swirling around his booted, ass-kicking legs.

Oh yeah. She liked these odds better.

Strength flooding back, Buffy turned to the vamp holding her stake. "I think that's mine," she told him, and then--in a striking tumble of limbs--took it back and planted it in his heart. A few demons later, she stopped and took a deep breath and looked around her. Four heavy demon corpses and a lot of dust. Carnage good, she thought. But she felt shaky, and her pulse rabbited up the side of her neck. She stared at Spike, who stared back, face devamped but chiseled into ice.

His gaze flicked down her body, assessing whether she was hurt. The inspection was as clinical as a doctor's or a torturer's, even when he paused to note the light gash on her cheek. And then he threw his stake to one side and turned and walked away.

Bastard, she thought simply, gaping until her mouth caught up with her brain: "Hey!" Then her belated body caught up too, and she ran after him. When Buffy grabbed his arm it was like tugging on the door of a bank vault, but she turned him. "What the hell was that?"

"Looked like me saving your life," Spike noted coolly. Mister I-don't-break-a-sweat. And of course he wasn't even breathing hard. At all. "I'm sure you'll tell me different, though." God. He sounded almost polite. She hated that, and hated her own trite reactions.

"I'm talking about you walking away. About this." She didn't know how his attitude could still get under her skin, but it did, making her bewildered and angry. "Why have you been avoiding me?"

"Been busy. Busy now, in fact." He turned and started walking off again, and she wasn't about to let him get away with that. She moved faster than he did and planted herself in front of him. He'd clearly have walked around, but she grabbed a handful of leather lapel.

"You know, there are a few anatomical terms for how you're behaving right now."

"And you've had your way with both."

Buffy flushed and nearly slapped him. Old habits died never, but this time something stayed her hand. Her own dignity, maybe, or the odd tilting that was happening inside her, as if two feelings were finally teetering into balance on a scale; the old anger on one side, and on the other...what? Maybe it was nothing; maybe she just didn't want to hurt him.

God. She didn't want to hurt him.

Before she could stop herself, Buffy cupped his face with one hand. She felt him stiffen. An apology rose to her lips but didn't quite form; she ran her thumb across his lips and watched his face. She could see him struggling for detachment, and then he drew in a deep breath, turning his head away as if her touch alone burned. It was the stylized gesture of a drama queen but she didn't question whether his pain was honest.

"You have your way with all of me," he grated out. His throat worked a long moment. "Maybe you should get me a leash--nice leather collar. Partial to black." He slewed his gaze back to her, coldness surrounding pin-points of burning rage. "Make your decision, why don't you? Then let me know."

And he walked away again.
He half wanted her to come after him; was relieved and bitter when she didn't. As dramatic exits went, it was a conflicted victory. He'd been shadowing her on and off for a week, and there was always that risk she'd be gang-banged during his off time, like tonight.

Spike had noticed strange things this past week. Unrest among the demon types. Clans who'd held uneasy truces were skirmishing; different races were banding together; gangs were forming of previously lazy buggers who'd barely gophered their heads up from the sewers before now. It wasn't all looting and keggers either. Just the other night he'd seen a pod of Trictnar busking on the sidewalk in front of his favorite trattoria--horns and tails hanging out for anyone to see, one of them strumming on a guitar and rasping out a Joan Baez cover. None of the humans passing by had blinked; a few had even tossed change in the hat. *It's a local fad,* he'd heard one man said knowingly to another, nodding at the Trictnar. *It's this whole get-up the kids do; kind of a new wave thing.*

What was the world coming to? He didn't know what was worse, the arrogance of lackbrain demons, or the ignorance of the bloody suburbanites. One sort put him and his kind at risk for unwanted attention, and the other sort didn't even see a risk because they were too stupid and sheep-headed to notice when they were three paces from being eaten.

He made his way back into town unhurriedly, walking along Alvarado under the overhanging trees that edged the cemetery's brick and iron fence. The paved road was wide and empty of cars; on the other side of the street was a tony golf course. In the open distance, beyond clumps of trees and shrubs, a useless white pagoda sat near the edge of a wide lake, skeletal in the darkness. He'd once killed some old codger there. Night game. After, he'd lit a fag and took all the little orange balls and stroked them one by one into the lake. Dru'd put on the fellow's pom-pommy hat and begged Spike to dance a fling with her. At his refusal she'd sulked and driven the cart away when he wasn't looking, forcing him to chase her down.

The local landscape held a strange nostalgia for him already, though his time spent here to date was only a tiny fraction of his long life. The burbs were all right. Parts like this anyway. Not a lot of humans crowded against each other out here like juiceboxes going stale on a market shelf, just a black road glittering under long rows of streetlights, symmetrical and chilly. Emptiness and rustling trees and the sky. Your dead buried on one side, and greenery stretching out on the other, the way a hunting ground might look in some vampire heaven.

Fanciful rubbish, he told himself, loathing his own broodiness. And as soon as the lights of the town began appearing ahead of him, his interest in the cultivated and antiseptic wilderness of Sunnydale waned and he felt the familiar stirring of desire for civilization. His own brand of it, anyway. Time for a drink. Shake off this soft-headed wanking, seek out the things that'd remind him he lived in the armpit of hell as a slayer's despised lapdog. Or a misunderstood rebel. He wasn't sure which suited him more tonight, but no matter. Fights needed to be started, blood drunk and spilled.

His steps carried him by habit to the latest incarnation of the Alibi Room, down recessed stairs in the sidewalk to the basement entrance of a former convent, whose converted cellar was now open round the clock to serve the bad and the ugly. Speaking of. The bouncer, a grumpy Chirago demon in a red satin cowboy shirt, gave him a lengthy once-over that threatened to become a twice until Spike sighed and slipped him a tenner. Chiragos couldn't count higher than their fingers and didn't
have many of those, and he was waved inside, where a wall of beery air hit him at the same moment a flock of seedy faces turned. Spike played a scowl around the room and stalked across patches of drying, blood-soaked sawdust to the bar. Rows of bottles gleamed there, tempting him to excess. When Willy spotted him, a look passed across his face that Spike liked to think was reserved for his appearances: nervous, cautious, disgusted.

It passed away just as quickly, replaced by a sour and ingratiating show of enthusiasm. "Hey, Spike. Always good to see you in here. Glass of AB neg?"

"Double. And give it a bump,"

Spike sat on a stool and swung around to scan the room. Best, he'd found, to put a little fear into the crowd before turning his back on them. It was also a good trick for provoking the most touchy of the bar's inhabitants; get the unavoidable fights over with early, pave the way for a good heavy soak. And the room was alive tonight, edgy and electrical and most of it trained on him. A posse of M'Fashnik demons glared at him from a corner booth. Surly, stoned Trictnars deliberately ignored his gaze. He counted a pod of Gnoslacs, two strangely solitary Hellions, some Lei Achs, several lesser demons, and a giggling table of fledglings, one of whom was making fangs out of ketchup and fries. It reflected badly on vampires everywhere. Watching her, Spike felt almost as ashamed as if he'd turned the silly bint personally. Christ, she couldn't have been more than seventeen when she bought it. Dawn's age.

No one stepped up for a bit of aggro, and irritably he turned back to the bar and downed half his blood before chasing it with whisky. Single malt. Willy knew to give him top-shelf, and Spike relished the burn, eyes half-closing. Shifting toward the bar, he winced in pain and glanced down at his shirt; a shadow on the grey cloth caught his eye and he touched it, drew away his fingers with a light film of blood. He dipped his fingers in his whisky and absently swirled them around. The cuff of his coat was getting frayed. The sight of it against his hand stirred him almost to melancholy. All trophies had to be tossed sooner or later, he supposed, or you risked turning into one of those sad wankers who carried around the skull of their first kill in a bowling bag and pulled it out for a yarn when they got a bottle or two in them. But who would he be next? He'd cultivated this. This attitude, this look. He had no plans.

"I am the baddest of the bad," he muttered to himself, inspecting his chipped fingernails, then looked up at Willy, who was ambling by. "Hey. You got any of those little cherries?"

"This probably isn't the best place for you to be tonight," said a concerned voice at his shoulder. Spike turned his head casually sideways, without moving the rest of his body. "Never is."

Clem was giving him a worried, almost reproving look. "Everyone's real antsy." Ears flopped to one side as he shook his head, and he laid one heavily swagged arm on the bar. He held a beer. "There've already been three fights."

"That so? My timing's off then."

"You're tough, Spike. But one day you'll get in over your head. I'd hate to see that," he said in his earnest way.

It was novel, hanging with someone who gave a shit whether you got busted or dusted. Not that he and Clem were bosom buddies, but they'd been tight for a couple of years now. Spike's lips shaped a tiny smile he would have denied was affectionate. "Get my friend here another round," he said to Willy. "His bottle looks low." Clem smiled as if genuinely surprised, and freaky as hell though it was, it reminded Spike of Buffy, of the rare luminous smiles she bestowed when joy escaped the
tight prison of her heart.

God, he thought. I am lame. He sucked in a cherry and didn't even try to knot it with his tongue.

"Thanks, Spike."

A switch flipped on his mood, and in darkness, Spike remembered why he often avoided Clem. Those sincere thanks, that plain good nature. Downright sickening, not to mention embarrassing. As if a dollar beer were something deserving of mention. He let the issue go, though. Far better targets for his perverse temper, and most within reach.

"Things have been antsy all over," Spike remarked, keeping the subject impersonal. " Noticed it myself this past week. Seen more action than usual on my rounds. Demons wanderin' out in the open, puffed up with entitlement. Walked in on a Dryac buyin' smokes and crisps in the Kwik-E Mart, hadn't even bothered to cover his tusks. 'S not normal." He flicked a sidelong glance at Clem. "You heard anything?"

"Just rumors," said Clem, taking his fresh beer. "Something big's coming. Something new." He sighed at his beer. "I was actually thinking of getting out of Sunnydale for a while."

A frown etched itself into Spike's forehead. "Yeah?"

"Always wanted to visit Vancouver. Plus, I've seen this thing before. Some new clan moves in, promises the world. It always looks rosy at first, but then they run out of humans, and everyone gets tense. Someone invokes the Gr'Nashic Code, someone else mocks it, the racial slurs fly, and before you know it, you've got internecine war." Dark eyes fixed on Spike's, expressing the sadness of the ages. "It's hard to sleep well when chaos is brewing," said Clem. "I just bought this great new bed from Pottery Barn. It's no help at all."

Spike knocked his glass of blood against Clem's beer bottle. "Here's to a good day's rest."

From the farthest, smokiest corner of the bar, Clude peered through his glasses at his notebook, then looked again to where the vampire sat hunched over in black leather, talking to his demon pal. "He's on the list," he said.

Lalethki shifted in the corner of the booth to get a better view of Spike. "I don't understand why we didn't take care of this sooner."

"I just follow orders, like you."

"He doesn't look so tough," Lalethki sneered. "Just another vampire in leather."

Clude pocketed his notes. "He's killed two slayers, thousands of humans, and countless demons." He took a sip of his milkshake, a long one that half-drained his glass. After wiping his lips, he said: "We'll take care of him together." And from across the room he watched the white-blond head turn sideways as the vampire spoke to his companion, his shoulders flexing beneath the long leather coat. He did not look dangerous, but he was.
"It's quiet," said Tara. "It's like it has that too-quiet feel, though. Don't you think? I could just be imagining it." She glanced around the deserted street; it was late enough that most trick-or-treaters would be at home, tucked into their beds. The neighborhood they walked through was locked down in the way that defined Sunnydale after dark, and few windows remained lit. Each house was a shadowed boxes hidden behind shrubs, silent, even the dogs swept inside for the night. Down at the end of the block the industrial district began, demarcated crosswise by Chapman Street, which edged a desolate field stretching to the underpass. In its ditches bodies were often found. Tonight barrel fires flickered out among the tall grass and rusting machinery, and the wind carried inhuman laughter to her.

Tara wished for that too-quiet feeling back.

Shouldering close, Willow tucked her hands in her jacket pockets. "'Too quiet' is kind of eluding me as a concept, I think. Quiet on Halloween I'm okay with. Usually by now we'd have reached the screaming and spidery part of the evening."

"So you don't think it'll happen tonight?" she asked. "The invasion?"

Willow stared down the street as if she weren't seeing it at all, as if her feet were moving her along automatically. "I don't know. Nothing in my research has said anything specific about when. Just what."

"These demons that are coming--the Grauth--from what you said, it sounded like the Fenwhar Compendium didn't have a lot of information." Tara wished she hadn't been called to babysit Kirsten last night; she'd had so many questions boiling inside. She still did, but she'd dwelled in her thoughts too long, getting lost in speculation and fears; she wasn't sure anymore what was important to focus on and what was trivial. She needed to look through the books herself. She learned best by direct application--maybe why she so often felt overshadowed by Willow, who was always first to solve any problem and thought redundant efforts a waste of time.

"It was sketchy," Willow admitted. "But I don't think we're going to find much more in our own library. I wish we had the Wiley-Barringer Encyclopedia, or even some of Angel's references. I did think about calling Fred, but...." She trailed off.

"You don't know if she'll tell," finished Tara.

"It seemed more important to keep the secret than to pursue the research." Willow's voice took on a thin, wavery note of indecision and second-guessing. Tara'd been there so often herself she knew that tune by heart. "Now I'm not so sure."

"We should call her," Tara said, quiet but firm in her resolve. She was in on this now. Her opinions counted, and she intended to put her weight behind them. Not for her own sake, but for Willow's. She'd gone it alone too long; a share of that burden needed to be taken off her shoulders. Released from secrecy, Willow's entire body revealed her tiredness: lank hair, fine bones showing closer to the skin, shadowed eyes.
"The invasion is coming this year, the prophecy said." Tara frowned. "That's only two more months. We need to be ready."

"You're right." Willow hooked her arm through Tara's, and Tara could hear the smile of relief in her lover's voice even without looking. But she did look, because...it was her Willow. Like a fox who'd stolen her heart, a red wildflower, a tree under whose shade she could rest. Her profile in the darkness was pale, the features more familiar to Tara than any sister's could ever have been. And kissable. There was worry to be kissed away.

"They won't hate you," said Tara, speaking to Willow's unspoken fears. "When it comes. When we explain. It'll be okay." The assurance she projected was almost enough to make her believe it herself; it had to be, even though her belly was tight, increasingly anxious as they neared the end of the street. She told herself not to fear a gust of wind rattling the leaves, not to exaggerate the threat of distant fires in the dark. Just shadows. And this was just another night, ordinary evil at work. Don't go buying trouble, her dad used to say.

Willow nodded with forced optimism. "Yeah, maybe. Maybe...."

The moment lingered on that uncertainty, each of them drifting apart in thought.

Neither Willow nor Tara looked up when a car drove past them slowly on the other side of the street.

"Five thirty-two, five thirty-six, five-forty," said one of the passengers. "This is it."

The driver pulled the car into the drive of a modest, red-roofed house, parking next to a station wagon. He turned off the engine and looked out his window at the grassy yard, in which kiddie toys were scattered like a colorful accident scene. An overturned tricycle fascinated him unduly for several long moments. Then from the back seat came the sharp sound of guns chambering rounds, calling him back to attention. He got out of the car along with his companions. Four doors shut quietly.

After a sharp inspection, the driver gestured them toward the house, and his three uniformed passengers filed neatly along the flagstone path toward the porch. The driver paused a moment more to peer up and down the street. Crickets emphasized the silence around them. No one had come to their windows to investigate the perfectly ordinary event of a perfectly ordinary car parking at a neighbor's drive. There was no movement at all, except far down the street where two figures walked hand in hand. But they were heading away, which was the safest direction for them though they didn't know it, and even as he watched they turned a corner and disappeared.

He followed the others up to the front door. They'd waited there for him, and when he nodded they raised their guns. He rang the bell. Seconds passed before the porch light snapped on. In its illumination it would be clear to anyone that the visitors to this house weren't human. It didn't matter.

The demon fixed a polite expression on his face as the door opened. The man inside blinked out at him, rubbing his stubbled jaw, his open robe and boxer shorts suggesting he'd been roused from
"Wow," the man said, looking amazed and then suddenly offering a wide smile and a salute. "Welcome to earth! All hail the New Reich!"

The creature at the door had taken his crisp new five-dollar bill with a grunt and allowed them entry. A good thing, since Xander was running out of money. The Alibi Room should probably have been their first stop, but Anya, with a disturbingly accurate compass for the demonic party vibe, had led him from dive to dive around town in a tightening circle that ended here. It was like she knew instinctively where all the worst bars were. Xander tried not to question that. At least they'd managed to last the night unscathed. So far.

"This place has gone downhill on a greased sled," he observed, gaze skipping from the bloody, sawdusty floorboards to the trash-encircled tables, to the broken ceiling lights. "Does no one respect the building code?"

"I'm sure they pay their share of bribes," Anya said reassuringly, and then waved at a group of horny demons, all of whom waved back with too much eagerness. "Clients," she said in a mild, businesslike aside.

"Ancient or recent?" he asked in trepidation, scowling their way.

"They have a standing order for Baby's Breath," she said.

"We sell baby's-breath?" Xander asked in puzzlement, then paused, cogs grinding toward the dark places he tried not to think about. "You know what--forget I asked that." As he continued his scan of the room, his eyes lit with dismay on a figure at the bar. "Oh hell."

Anya followed his gaze. "He may have news," she noted.

"Like he'd tell us." Xander walked over anyway, conscious of being inspected by too many eyes. Some of them on stalks, some without whites, some kind of dribbly and...ew. He forced himself to focus on Spike, and laid a casual hand on his leather-jacketed shoulder as he came up behind him. Spike whirled on his stool, one hand clamped to Xander's neck, the other digging a stake into his gut. Almost before Xander began gasping for breath he was released.

"Gahhh," said Spike in strangled, painful disgust, smacking a hand to his temple.

Xander smirked unkindly. "Jumpy much? And, hey--got any Advil on you?"

The seething hatred in Spike's eyes when he looked up was something Xander hadn't seen in a while. Not bright and unveiled like this. He seemed unable to speak he was so angry, and from the clenched, working line of his jaw Xander knew that if Spike's chip failed right now, he'd be a dead man. And not from a cool strangulation or a quick staking either. Spike wasn't in game face though, which was weird--and somehow more personal.

"I could snap my fingers and have you killed quicker than downing a shot," Spike said coldly. "I
could have you hung by your ears, gutted with a swizzle stick, drained into the nearest cask and sold on tap. Tell me why I shouldn't.

"He's the father of my unborn child," Anya chirped before Xander could reply with all the nasty things waiting on his tongue. She laced hands across her svelte, innocent-looking stomach. "And every child needs a daddy."

Spike stared at her gut in appalled wonderment while Xander stumbled back a step and yelped, "What?!" His own saucer-eyed gape must have matched Spike's.

"I was going to tell you," said Anya. "Soon." She beamed. "Soon became now."

"You've spawned?" Spike said to him, with a regard undecided between grudging respect and disgust.

"Oh god," said Xander, staring glassy-eyed at himself in the mirror behind the bar. "I need a drink."

From the next stool, some ghastly, flabbacious demon--oh, wait, it was just Clem--raised a hand to signal Willy. "Shot of Jack," he said. "And hey, congratulations," he added warmly to Xander, who nodded back in a daze.

Spike grimaced. "Make that two shots." He tucked his stake away, and when the drinks came handed one to Xander. "Here's to your Bad Seed." Despite his jaded scowl, he clinked his glass aggressively in a toast and tossed back its contents.

"Whoa, there's nothing wrong with my seed," Xander retorted, but then it occurred to him that precisely because of that fact he was going. To have. A baby. He downed his own shot in one fiery, panicked gulp of incipient fatherhood.

"There," said Spike, banging his glass back on the counter. "I've been all nice and polite about the sprog-to-be. An' I'm not even going to have you killed. Now get out the hell of here before I change my mind."

"Oh, relax," Anya said. "You act like we're bad for your reputation or something."

"Well, not to put too fine a point on it." Spike stared at her meaningfully, his raised eyebrows saying: duh.

"I don't know why more demons don't try to kill you." Anya's speculation was matter-of-fact as she looked around the bar. "You're on a crusade against their kind."

Lips compressed grimly, Spike closed his eyes a moment, then opened them. "Hello," he said, affecting surprise. "You're still here. Pining to die, then?" He made a gesture as if signaling for a hit, aborting it as Anya spoke.

"What would you do exactly?" she asked with what sounded like real curiosity. "Call someone over, offer them money? Because I could probably offer them more to kill you. My stocks are doing very well."

That's my girlfriend, thought Xander with pride. Then queasily beckoned for another drink.

Xander took his second shot and drank half. Sunlight hit his gut, made him pleasantly warm and numb. If he drank the other half now, he wouldn't have to hold onto the glass. Good idea. He had so many. "Buffy's been worried about you," he said, glass empty. Wait...was that him who said that? He blinked, and Spike blinked back, and then Xander took a deep, shaky breath and spun truth back into falsehood. "She cries and cries," he went on, tone edging into sarcasm, "And I think she may join a nunnery."

"Xander!"

The fleeting hope in Spike's face had vanished, and his eyes were arctic again. Before he could speak though, someone--thing--loomed at Xander's shoulder. He craned his head north to find himself looking at a great and terrible shagginess. The shagginess was looking at Spike.

"You shouldn't have come here tonight, vampire."

"Yeah," Spike said curtly. "Heard that one already."

"You reek of humans," Shaggy went on.

"Heard that too." Spike was getting impatient, looked on the verge of a snarl. Xander found he suddenly didn't mind Spike's temper so much, given his own proximity to Shaggy. He managed to tip a nervous smile the thing's way.

"Hi," he said. "How's the weather up there?"

Shaggy threw back his head and roared. Xander and Anya took synchronized steps to flank Spike. "That joke sickens me!" Shaggy cried. "Ages I've walked the earth, and it never changes, everywhere I go, inquiries about the weather. Why ask when it is so clearly the same weather here," he made a chopping gesture at his head, "as it is down there for you, little stupid man?"

"I, I don't know." Xander smiled and swallowed. "It now seems very childish and cliched. And your bigness...very menacing. I'm sorry."

"Do you protect this son-of-a-shrimp?" the demon asked Spike, red eyes glowing.

"Me?" Spike looked sidelong at Xander, jaw carving the air between them, cheekbones hollowing a moment. "No. Can't say as I do." He looked away, while Xander's heart sank stomachward. "On the other hand..." Spike leaned back on his stool in a rude, gape-legged sprawl. "I object to you on principle, mate."

"Likewise," snarled Shaggy and heaved himself at Spike, who slithered aside almost too quickly to see, then popped up and tripped the demon, slamming him across the bar like a fallen oak. A big gleaming knife hung in the air and then sank into the back of the demon's neck. It took Xander longer than it should have to process that the knife was attached to Spike's hand, which was attached to Spike, who was looking dangerously satisfied. He stared Xander down with a wordless, unfriendly smile as he yanked out the knife and wiped it on the demon's jacket. Wish that had been you, his eyes said.

"Cool," Clem piped up cheerily. "Bar fight."

A loud crash followed, and a lot of jostling. Later, Xander recalled only fragments: jumping to avoid an overturned table that showered tap beer; slipping on a patch of blood and just missing decapitation by a claw aimed his way; staking some vamp whose last startled gasp smelled of french fries; running for the door with his arm around Anya. As they left he heard Willy's nasal cries of dismay ("Hey, watch the juke!") and Spike's growls mingling with the confused babble of
the brawl.

Outside, the night was quiet and the air crisp and Xander's sigh of relief plumed out like a cartoon bubble. He kept an arm around Anya as they climbed the stairs, and then rested with her against the building's brick facade.

"As of tonight, no more bar-hopping with the nonhuman crowd," he said when he'd caught his breath. "We stick to safe, well-lit places that play Britney Spears mixes and don't serve blood." He shifted to lean on one shoulder, laid his hand across her belly with tenderness, fingers spread. "And no more patrolling. Our new number one rule is: keep the sprog safe." A smile surfaced; he was absurdly happy.

Anya smiled back. "Oh, I'm not pregnant."

Okay, thought Xander, did a brick just land on my head, or did she say-- "Huh? And a...whuh?"

"I just said that to shut up Spike. And to see how you'd react."

"Well, yay to the first, but...man, An." He turned away with a bemused head shake, looking out at the hazy sky above the office buildings and trying to switch gears. In the distance he could see the moving lights of a plane as it arrived at the airport, descending as he did.

"You reacted very well," Anya soothed, rubbing his arm. "Your panic fell within an acceptable range of normal responses, and then you became overly protective and giddy."

"Uh huh." He couldn't even muster a dry quip; maybe he'd spent all his sarcasm on Spike. Or maybe it was eaten up by the crushing sadness and relief of realizing he wasn't a father of some little tadpole in Anya's belly. Not yet, anyway.

"Are you angry?"

Xander took a deep breath and slid an arm around her shoulder. "No. We should get going, though. Head back to Buffy's." He tilted his watch face to catch the dim light, glanced across Anya at the time. "Halloween's almost over. Guess it's a dud this year."

"And we're glad, right?" Anya asked in her fact-checking tone, as they pushed off and began walking.

Xander, lost in his conflicted thoughts, nodded absenty. "We're glad."

And in his distraction, which held Anya's worried gaze, he guided them past the mouth of an alley in which nothing visibly ominous lurked, unless you left the street and moved further in along its narrow bricked walls, past the rats and the overflowing trashcans to reach an ordinary looking garage, inside of which were idling a row of seven school buses from which uniformed soldiers filed.

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Saturday, November 1
A storefront clock whirred to life and chimed the midnight hour with muted resonance in the empty
downtown streets. A few blocks away, leather swirled around the legs of a figure striding
homeward.

"Did you see him?" Lalethki asked as they trailed the vampire back to his cemetery. They were
keeping a safe distance, and the lowness of his whisper had more to do with the pain radiating
through his jaw than a need for caution. He pressed the dripping, ice-filled handkerchief tighter to
his cheek. "He socializes with humans, kills his own kind. Vamp should be a pariah."

"He has presence," noted Clude, pushing his glasses up his nose. One lens was cracked now. "Not
to mention age, power, connections. And not all demons hold to the ancient code, or idealistic
concepts like the brotherhood of hell." He gave Lalethki a pointed, ironical look. "We ourselves
don't. You know the principles of the new order. Other races lack our discipline. They must be
guided, regulated...controlled." The last word sank into a momentary silence.

"But he's not doing it for political reasons," Lal complained, after mulling this over.

Clude allowed himself a thin smile as he watched Spike disappear through the cemetery gate. "He
will."

Buffy heard the heavy tread of his boots descending the ladder, and thought about hiding, just to
make it all the more dramatic when she sprang her presence on him. Instead, she stood in the
center of his crypt and folded her arms. Then laced them behind her back in a posture of
nonchalance. Then, noticing her perky breasts, hastily folded them again.

He spotted as soon as he walked in, and paused a moment before continuing to the fridge, tossing
his coat over a nearby chair on the way. That was promising, Buffy thought. He wasn't going to run
off if he'd removed his coat.

"All topsy-turvy, you stalkin' me," Spike observed. He had his back to her and was inspecting the
refrigerator's contents. He closed it without removing anything and scrounged a bottle from an
open case of liquor.

"Who says I'm stalking you?" she challenged.

He turned his head in a raven's swivel; his gaze was piercing. The bad men in her mom's bad
novels had gazes like that. Though if his name had been Lord Spike Ravenswood she might have
gotten over him long ago.

"Smelled you in here every night this week," he said. "That flowery perfume of yours gets
everywhere."

"It's soap," she said, hating that he'd known of every visit. "I don't wear perfume."

"It's not soap, pet." Spike watched her a moment, then took a drink.
Buffy shifted, stroked her fingers along each arm, nearly hugging herself. It was cold. Another winter for him, buried in this crypt like a popsicle in a deep freeze. She thought about their first time together after his return, how she'd invited him to live in her basement, and was glad now he'd turned her down. But she didn't want to come here when the nights were so chilly, when his sheets were. And his hands, under the sheets.

"I thought you might want to come over," she said, trying to make it sound like a peace offering and not her own lonely need. "Stay with me. Stay...the night."

Spike paced silently in front of her, muscles tense, as if thinking it through with his body. Something in the way he was moving alerted her. He halted as she stepped closer and ran her gaze down his torso. But when she reached out a hand to the top button of his shirt, he caught her wrist, held her eyes with decision. "Not tonight, love. I've got a headache." The words were lightly mocking, but his face was hard, devoid of humor.

"You're hurt." Buffy thought he must have taken one in the ribs fighting those demons earlier. It was probably wounded pride, not flesh, that made him keep her at bay.

"Not at all," he said, letting go of her wrist and moving casually off.

That only roused her instincts further. There was some wrongness here, because Spike was lying about something he shouldn't need to lie about. Wouldn't have bothered to lie about. Buffy could have tackled him to the floor and ripped open his shirt, but shook off that idea reluctantly. It would defeat the purpose.

"Let me see," she said quietly. She moved to his side, not touching but forcing him to turn by her own strength of will. He sighed and began unbuttoning his shirt one-handed, still holding the bottle in the other. After a moment Buffy brushed aside his fingers and took over. She could see stripes of red skin, but it wasn't until she pushed the shirt open that she saw the extent of it, what it was. Burns in the shape of a small cross had been pressed into chest and belly; most fresh and raw, others starting to fade.

Spike watched Buffy's face, thinking that even if he had her by his side for a century as he'd had Dru, he would never tire of looking at her, of cataloguing her every expression. Revealing one moment, indecipherable the next. And, well, yeah. A bloody girl, wasn't she? Bints were as changeable as the weather, brains opaque as aggies. No man knew what went on inside there, and it didn't help to hold the squishy mass in your hand either. What was she thinking now as she stared at his burnt skin, touched her fingers to him so lightly it felt like a kiss? Even as he asked himself the question, her face was changing, hardening into a subdued anger. That expression he knew.

"Who did this to you?"

Spike blinked, briefly thrown. Well. All right. He hadn't expected her to leap there. It tempted him to play the sympathy vote. "Why?" he drawled. "You going to beat him up for me?"

"Oh my god," she said, face threatening to crumple in a way that unmanned him instantly, went straight to his gut and made him ready to kill and die on her behalf, whatever it took to erase that horror. "Was it Xander? Did he do this?"

"Hell, no!" Shocked into blurtting out the denial, he faintly gaped at her, and she pulled herself back together. When she'd redressed her face, covered that naked pain, Spike was able to relax. "It's interesting, though, Slayer--you taking this for Harris's handiwork and not, say, your pal Alex's, come back to work me over."
"This isn't his style," Buffy said tightly, right before her eyes widened and she processed the implication of her own words. "I mean, I didn't really think it was Xander. I just--" She moved her arms as if she couldn't find a place to put them; getting all worked up. Tense as a spring. "He's the only person I know who hates you this much," she finished. "At least, the only 'him'."

"Oh, a lot of people hate me." Spike took a swig from his bottle, feigning satisfaction. Inside though he could feel his mood twisting and blackening at the reminder of Xander and all her other friends.

"But this was personal." She stepped close again, fingers stroking the air at his chest, not quite touching. Making him ache even as he sank deeper into darkness. He wanted to pull away from her as far as he could go, away from the sympathy she offered, which always proved false in the end.

"Tell me," she said.

Spike swallowed and retreated from the lulling command of her voice. Not tonight, he thought. "Don't worry about it," he tossed off as he moved to the bed. Back safely turned, he made his voice light: "Did it myself. Got bored." He plonked down on the bedcovers, stretching out in a pose of comfort to regard her; admission made, distance established. "Terrible thing, boredom. The longer you walk this earth, the worse it grows."

"This is boredom?" She sounded horrified. "What, you couldn't watch Must See TV?"

"Well," he said, feeling viciousness take him in its grip, "Thought about ripping off a convenience store, but then I told myself you wouldn't like it." He let the cruel sing-song sink in before adding pointedly, "So I did this instead." Sucking in his cheeks, he savored her flinch of pain, the sweet zing of her guilt. There you go, bitch. Hurts, doesn't it?

Buffy was looking away from him, and he could sense her inner struggle, see it in her fists. To go, to stay. Whether to retaliate; or maybe just how. "Spike." She moved toward the bed and he tensed, more afraid of her gentleness than her strength. "I know it hurt you, that crack about, about keeping you on a leash. But I wasn't--" A swallow of her throat. "It wasn't serious." Almost gentle words, except her face was taut, voice a live wire.

Spike tipped his head back a little further. "Oh, but it was. You were right, love. And I've always known it. The only way to be with you is on a leash, all this libido locked up. Your bad fairy offered me the choice, didn't she--soul, demon. And what did I choose? You." Pressure was gathering in his chest and skull. "You think I don't rewind that little scene over and over?" He leaned forward abruptly, pointing to his head as his anger grew, wound his finger jerkily as if turning a movie reel. "Over and over. Every day. Every day I have a good laugh at myself. Thought I'd made the wrong choice for you. Turns out it was the right one, isn't that so, pet? Makes you wonder what kind of soft-headed berk sticks with a woman who only wants him if he's crippled and castrated."

"Crippled? You fight as hard as I do." Her eyes were flashing. "And the other thing I think I'd have noticed by now. God, I can't believe you're sitting there feeling sorry for yourself because you're not a psychotic thing feeding off my friends."

Any other time the backhanded compliment might have distracted him, but Spike brushed it off and stood, abandoning his bottle to spill across the sheets. "Oh, don't imagine that little fantasy hasn't crossed my mind, pet." He loomed, wanting to be close enough to watch her face. "Take this chip out and I'd make an ashtray out of Harris's thick skull and play dominos with the leftovers. Like this." He snapped his fingers nearly against her cheek.
She hit him of course. He let her, turning his head back to smile at her through the pain. The taste of his own blood only whetted his rage. Made him think of all the blood he'd gone without. He half-expected another blow, but Buffy just looked up at him, something like disappointment in her eyes. Something worse than anger, anyway. "Is that what you wanted?" she asked. "A chance to swagger, another dose of punishment?" She was trying to take the piss out of him, and Spike almost deflated under her cool regard.

"What I want," he said, hardening his resolve, "is for you to stand up to your friends. Admit I feed your nature." His eyes bore into hers. "I make you stronger, hone your edge."

"I don't need you," Buffy said immediately, striking out as if he'd attacked her.

Spike fumed and gripped her shoulders. "Need doesn't matter. Want does. Want me, Buffy. Want me. I'm a hard bastard. A killer. I'm rotten. Can't you love me for me and not in spite?" He knew how stupid the words were as soon as they left his mouth. She wasn't Jesus sodding Christ, bestowing blessings on the unworthy. He meant his plea anyway, couldn't help it. Couldn't help but hope she might finally bend to the sheer force of his will and love, the way she had for Angel.

"Who says I love you at all?" she asked. Her eyes were big and amazed. And then abruptly, horribly, she began to laugh. Not mockingly, but in honest amusement. "I can't believe you," she gasped through giggles. "Love you for being a murderer? Oh my god, Spike."

Spike's hands dropped from her shoulders, and he thought seriously about killing her. He could do it. In hot blood, in cold. With the crack of his fist against her throat. And he wondered how he could adore Drusilla's cruelty, and even that of Angelus once upon a time, but hate it in her. A golden cruelty, like sunshine; which was just fire, far away. If he loved even her cruelty, the way he loved every other particle of her...it would be too much. Burn him up.

"I mean," she laughed, "Come on. I'm sorry, but...that's too crazy even for you."

He'd asked her to care for him, and thought that even with all the troubles between them she'd come to accept that idea. Apparently care was a long way from love, as far as he was from sun. All her soft moans, her nails digging into his back, the way she breathed his name: meaningless, carrying her not one flight higher to love. Spike turned away and pressed the heel of his hand between his brows, where the ridges of his inner face were shifting wildly under the skin, trying to solidify.

"Go," he said, unsure if the word was a warning or a rejection. He heard her laughter hiccup to a stop, then a soft hand touched his shoulder. He whirled on her, showing his face, half-trapped between monster and man. He could still feel the crawling itch under the surface, the ribboning movement like wind across a lake.

"Get the hell out!" Spike bared his fangs in punctuation.

Buffy stepped back, arms raised in a defensive stance. "I don't want to go," she said, looking surprised--how had he surprised the bitch? Surely he was as sad and predictable as sun coming over the sodding hill. And was she a touch desperate? Not a candle to him. "Not like this," she said. "Spike--"

"Get. The. Bloody. Hell. OUT." The last word roared from him and he swung his arm, knocking over a lamp, and then kicked his bedside table to splinters. The wall was right there, unforgiving stone ready to take his bloody fists, but he merely leaned against it, arms splayed like some luckless git being patted down on the roadside. Eyes closed, he listened to her silence, and then he listened to her leave.
When she passed outside the compass of his devotion, Spike sat heavily on the edge of the bed. His sodden bedsheets smelled bitter, as if an alkie had died in them, and the light made his head ache. He put his face in his hands, but the light poured through the fan of his fingers, the lamp's red shade like a lady's skirt gone askew as she lay broken on the ground, showing her shocking white legs. He couldn't bring himself to move or sweep it up, though. Couldn't set it right.

When he heard footsteps on the stairs, he lifted his head and snarled. Game-faced, he didn't think he could control himself any longer--but it wasn't her. Two sets of footsteps, and none of her grace. He hoped they'd be something he could kill, and smiled when he saw they were.

"What have we here?" Spike said, rounding a pillar and striking a pose to contemplate his visitors. He fancied himself as one of those poncey male models. His face wasn't so pretty right now, though, and he could see them growing wary, their dark gazes measuring his gold one before dropping to consider his wounded chest.

"Looks like the slayer doesn't take care of her toys," said the slightly taller demon, who wore spectacles. The way the light glanced off them irritated Spike, and he growled and sauntered forward. The demons exchanged a look. "We know you kill demon kind," said Specs quickly, holding up his hands to halt Spike's advance. "We're here to offer you a job. The pay is excellent, the benefits even more so."

Spike stopped a few inches away from the fellow and made a show of sniffing him. "That so," he said without interest. He straightened his head, attention sharpening until he saw a twitch of nervous eye behind glass. He carefully drew the spectacles off, smiled, then dropped them to the ground and crushed them underfoot. "You don't smell of money." He adjusted the brim of the demon's fedora to a jauntier tilt. "In this New Age cult, are you? Expect you've got a whole testimony you're just dying to unleash." Rage softened and sweetened his voice so words rolled out like molasses, and he ached to torture someone as slowly as seduction. "Go on, share. Give me the recruitment speech. I've heard it all, mate. Nothing you say can surprise me."

The demon's lips thinned into the approximation of a smile. "We'd like to offer you a Captain's commission in the Army of the New Grauth Reich."

Spike paused, briefly nonplussed. "Okay. That's...different. Never been offered a commission before. Still," he shrugged, "If you're the General, I'm gonna have to pass." He clamped a hand round the blighter's grey and greasy throat.

"I'm a civilian for now," Specs choked, tugging at Spike's wrist to dislodge his grip. After a moment he gave up and resumed passive strangulation. "Please hear me out."

"Well, since you say please." His hand tightened.

The shorter demon finally stirred, taking a document from his coat pocket. It was thick, creamy paper the likes of which Spike hadn't seen in a century, and he watched idly as Shorty unfolded it. After a throat clearing, he read: "The Imperial State of Grauth offers you the following, pursuant with activating a commission of Captain in the Army of the New Grauth Reich: a base salary of
seventy thousand turgrik per annum. Furnished officer's quarters. One personal live-in servant. Three daily uniforms and accessories, including boots. One standard-issue sword--"

"All right," said Spike, rolling his eyes and releasing his grip. "I get the drift." Watchful and silent, Specs rubbed at his throat. Spike walked away to light a cigarette, giving himself time to think. Mad as hatters, they were. But they'd got some organization to them from the sound of things. And he had nothing better to do than look into it a bit further. Frowning, he tried to think of why this might be a bad idea, and was relieved when he came up blank. Success or failure, flesh or dust--what did it matter at this point; it was all just playing dice to while away the years. And besides. He could use a vacation from the human element about now.

Maybe it was time to see what these demons had to offer.

"Fine," he said after a minute, turning. "I'm game. Lifelong dream of mine to join the army, be all that I can be. I feel manlier just thinkin' about it. Where do I sign?"

Gits one and two smiled knowingly at each other. "We can't finalize your commission here," said Specs. "Consider this an initial interview. To determine your level of interest. You'll need to meet with one of our recruitment officers next."

Spike was already buttoning up his shirt and shrugging into his coat. "Right. Let's be off then." He shook off his game face to give his visitors a winning smile. "Don't want to keep the brass waiting."

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The Scoobs began trickling in after midnight, beginning with Xander and Anya. When they came in all mushy and whispery, Dawn feigned interest in the monster movie she was watching, even though the cheeso space vamps were pathetic compared to the real thing. She wondered if anyone in Hollywood have ever seen a real vampire. Well, there was Angel, who went to ritzy parties once in a while, but he didn't count because he could pass for human, the way Mister Bintliff, her history teacher, said light-skinned blacks sometimes used to pretend they were white. It was stupid. If you were going to be a vampire, Dawn thought, half the fun would be showing off, like terrorizing all the jerks who used to make fun of you in high school just because your purse spilled open and your tampons and your stake rolled down the hall. Like comparisons between the two were so original and witty.

Of course, once you were turned, maybe you looked at things differently. Down in her heart of hearts, Dawn hoped she never got turned. It would kill Buffy. And Buffy would have to kill her. Unless Spike did. She sometimes suspected Spike might stick by her, if it happened. Might let her hang at his crypt until she got her own. Maybe with all her former keyness she'd turn out to be a good vampire, help Spike and her sister slay demons, feed only off bad guys. It wouldn't be so bad, if it happened like that.

Sometimes...sometimes she got the urge to kill things.

The space vamp with the big breasts straddled the clueless guy and began unbuttoning his shirt. "Sheesh," said Dawn in disgust. "She's got silver eyes. Doesn't he even see that?"
Anya crunched a potato chip consideringly. "I don't think he's looking that high."

"Yeah, she's all 'I vill vamp you vith my space breasts'," snarked Dawn.

"They do defy gravity, don't they?"

Xander made a faint throat-clearing sound from further down the couch, and Dawn's lips twitched. She didn't know how he could live with Anya and still wig over a little frank girl talk. It wasn't like she'd said 'tits' or even made that 'nipples like gumdrops' comment she'd been thinking about. "They're like party balloons," she said instead, then paused as two heads turned her way. "At a really skeezy party," Dawn amended uncomfortably.

"Gee," said Xander brightly, looking at his watch. "Getting late. I wonder where everyone is."

As if on cue, the front door opened, and Tara and Willow walked in on a breeze of cool air. Tara had her hands tucked into her cuffs for warmth, and gave Dawn a tiny smile. "Hey," she said. "Sorry we're late--we were going to call, but we met up with a vamp."

"He thought we were late-night snacks," added Willow.

Tara nodded. "In so many words." She turned to Willow. "What did he call us again?"

"Hostess cupcakes!" Her indignance made Dawn grin. "'We'll cupcake you,' I said, which, uh, as threats go, I admit wasn't very scary. And okay, cupcake isn't a verb, which he just had to stop and point out." She sounded briefly irritable, but perked up again with a triumphant smile. "He regrets that now, I bet. In whatever dusty hell-place he's gone to."

"I think that's my hair, honey." Tara tipped her head to one side and brushing her fingers through it with a grimace of distaste.

"Saving the world from vampy English majors." Xander cracked his fingers and settled back against the couch. "I feel we've done our Halloween duty for yet another year."

Tara and Willow took seats. "So, no big bad?" asked Tara cautiously, looking around the room.

"Well, we met up with Spike." Xander paused complacently. "No big."

"We went around to every place where demons congregate," said Anya. "Pits, dives, social clubs, and that new karaoke bar over on Fifth."

"Zip," said Xander. "Just a lot of heavy drinking, big talk, and the obligatory bar fight. Cue your cream pies and pianos. Except there was no piano. And no pies. I saw no pies," he assured them in a serious but deeply goofy tone.

Anya frowned. "Everywhere we went, though, it seemed," she hesitated, "oddly restless. As if everyone were getting worked up. Didn't you notice that?" She turned to Xander, who shook his head. "I sensed a great deal of undirected energy. Just...charging."

"Mystical?" asked Willow, frowning.

"More hormonal. Like soccer fans before a big game." When everyone looked at her, Anya's shoulders drew up. "What? A lot of disgruntled wives snap during the World Cup."

Dawn sat curled with a pillow on her lap, picking the thread from its trim and listening silently. Someday she'd do important things, have the fate of the world in her hands. She might be a big-
shot lawyer who sent people to the gas chamber, or a brain surgeon who saved them. She might even do some slaying on the side, when her sister wasn't controlling every tiny detail of her boring, pathetic, seventeen-year-old unlife. On the side? Hell, maybe she'd go all out and give the chosen one some competition. By now she'd soaked up so much strategy and demon lore through bench-warming that she could open her own slay-for-pay outlet, rake in the money her sister refused to charge. Angel had the right idea. He was a businessman. Dawn wondered if he'd ever thought of opening a branch office of Angel Investigations in Sunnydale.

"Hey guys," said Buffy, coming in just as Dawn visualized coming out from behind her big desk to greet a client. She was wearing a classy business suit with practical heels, and her name plate was gold. Dawn Summers, Chief Investigator.

Buffy took off her jacket, bone tired and dispirited and trying hard not to show it. Her fight with Spike had been the final, ugly straw of an evening she was happy to see over. She dropped into a chair and scanned her friends' faces, reading the news there before anyone spoke. "Nothing?"

"Define nothing," said Xander quizzically.

"School buses? Fedora demons? A big, pink bulldozer?"

Xander's face blanked. "Wait, the bulldozer was pink?"

"We didn't see anything unusual," Willow put in.

Buffy turned her way, studying her dispassionately: big eyes full of worry, slumped shoulders, a tiredness as great as her own. And Buffy wanted to care, but she was in that frozen, crushed-between-rocks place again, where her heart felt it couldn't expand one way or another. Scylla, Charybdis, and wow. She actually remembered those words. Stood to figure. One day her own life might be an unhappy myth they told to bored kids. Willow her Scylla, Spike her Charybdis, the two of them wrecking her at sea.

"We walked all over." Tara's voice seemed to hold a note of guilt. "There were a few vamps and, oh, some demons were having a sing-along in the park, but they looked harmless." She looked to Willow for confirmation. "W-we just let them be."

Buffy picked at her cuticles. Time for a manicure.

"We saw Spike," Anya volunteered. Buffy looked up. "He was grumpy and not very nice, especially after Xander--"

"An." Xander's face was tight, and at his interruption an uncomfortable silence fell.

"I saw him too," Buffy said expressionlessly. "He helped me kill a gang of demons and vamps. They were working together...I was outnumbered." Even without looking, she could feel the uncertainty threading around the room. A movement caught the corner of her eye: Willow's fingers twining restlessly at her lap, settled by Tara's hand. She made herself go on in a more businesslike tone. "The fraternization thing seems new. Demons and vamps don't usually fight together unless they have some organizational muscle behind them. But they got too dead to talk. Oh, and some of the more colorful local color seems primed for the next Woodstock. But I didn't see anything too weird tonight either. Baddies don't go around spilling their guts to the slayer, but as portents go it's all been pretty vague so far."

"So, no super-sized evil...does this mean the big prophecy's been rescheduled?" Dawn asked hopefully.
"We don't know that it was scheduled," Buffy answered. "But it looks like we can scratch Halloween off the calendar."

Xander shifted. "That doesn't leave a lot of year."

"No. It doesn't. It's time to get serious." Buffy's mind was circling the drain for the night. All she wanted to do was climb into bed and sleep dreamlessly for about ten hours. But she clung to the moment. "When you guys get back from your trip, we're going back to the brainstorm. This time I want a force-ten gale. No more useless scribbling on scratch paper." She snapped a look at Willow, whose lips parted wordlessly. "It's time to think outside the box. There must be spells for far-seeing, for tracking magical energies on the move. We start there. And we call in Giles--and Angel."

"Sounds like a plan, Buff." Xander gave her a little smile, and for a moment the ice around her heart melted. Seven years of loyalty, love, and apology were in that smile. It was almost enough to make her return it.

She expected Willow to say something, anything; and maybe Tara. But the witches were quiet, heads bowed as if to avoid her eyes. As if? Avoidance there, definitely.

In staggered shifts everyone rose and said their good-nights; Xander and Anya were wished a fun trip and waved off for the weekend. Dawn issued elaborate yawns but wanted to keep watching her movie. She snuggled into the couch as Buffy straightened the living room around her and switched off lights. In the hall, Willow and Tara huddled close, then went upstairs together. Buffy followed, leaving her sister to bathe in the blue flickering glow of the television.

In the upper hall, she could hear the rise and fall of voices from Willow's room, strained and muffled and anxious. She paused briefly with her hand resting against the door, then let it drop and walked away. It probably didn't have anything to do with her, and if it did...there was really nothing to be said. She wouldn't make apologies; she'd accept them, but not as excuses. She had only herself now to trust, because no one else could say for sure when her own patience with failure stopped being wise and started putting them all at risk. She had to be a general and she had to be a bitch.

A lamp burned in Dawn's room, and she briefly looked in. The smell of fresh paint overpowered anything else, and the furniture had been returned not quite flush to the walls, in case the trim hadn't fully dried. Her own room had the same sharply finished air, and she wandered around, stroking the crisp wallpaper and the glossy surface of her new dresser. The furniture was just DIY stuff, cheap yet unaffordable, but the renewed face of her room made her happy. She'd owned this house ever since her mom died; only years later did she finally feel as if she might be able to start making it her own. Maybe now that she'd moved forward, it wouldn't feel so disloyal to take down some of her mom's old art, put up something of her own choosing.

I may actually have a personal style--oooh, I could do the kitchen next, she thought. As she changed into her pajamas, visions of Italian tiles and granite countertops danced in her head, and on the countertops sat appliances in bright kicky colors, like the yellow mixer she'd seen at the mall the other day. If she had one of those handy, things to mix surely wouldn't be far behind. Eggs. Cakes. Other stuff. You could probably even mix cereal and milk.

Buffy got into bed and flipped through a few home decoration magazines. These were the pictures she wanted in her dreams tonight. No prophecies, just sling-back chairs and plump couches and Dalmatian-spotted lampshades and that red lacquer table.

And the rug shaped like a leaf....
Buffy woke abruptly and totally and stared at the ceiling. She'd been dreaming of something she had already forgotten, except that there'd been puppies on a Persian rug in front of her fireplace. Something had woken her, and she lay motionless, waiting and listening. There was no obvious reason to be worried but things felt...strange. Though still dark outside, it was brighter than usual in her room. The neighbors must have a new security spotlight. It dragged the shadows on her ceiling into new shapes, different angles, like geometry that didn't add up. It didn't interest her, but she thought it might have confused the birds. They'd started chirping weakly far too early; she could hear them through the window glass.

Swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, Buffy stretched. She felt completely awake even though she couldn't have had more than three hours sleep. When she snapped on the lamp and glanced at the clock by habit, the time registered as nonsensical. "Eight o'clock?" she muttered, trying to process it. She picked it up and stared closely, but the second hand was still sweeping along, no slower than usual. Had she slept the entire day? Why hadn't anyone woken her up? She put the clock back down and glared at its face in confusion. Her plans to get a cup of hot milk and catch up on some light reading had been thrown weirdly out of joint.

Downstairs the doorbell rang.

Buffy's head snapped sharply around in response. Dread was suddenly crawling up the back of her neck and ice pouring through her veins, the feelings so disconnected from any immediate source that she wondered if this were a nightmare. From the hall she heard Willow's murmuring voice and then her downward tread.

This was wrong.

When Buffy came out of her room two minutes later, she was dressed. She'd shoved a stake in her back pocket. Habit. Instinct. Fear. As she descended the stairs, Xander and Anya came into view, their faces turning up to her, wide-eyed and white. Everyone was standing grouped in the foyer--Willow, Tara, Xander, Anya, Dawn--looking at her. To her. All their expressions and poses were slightly different, and Buffy couldn't focus. She only felt their collective panic and fear; she was part of it herself.

"What?" she said, almost a whisper.

Xander took a breath. "The sun," he said, staring at her. He swallowed. "It's gone."

The End
Chapter End Notes

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
Xander took a breath. "The sun," he said, staring at her. He swallowed. "It's gone."

Buffy stared back at him, stomach rolling over at the certainty of his tone. She grasped for denial, panic firing her nerves. "What do you mean 'gone'? Like, overcast?"

"No."

"Eclipse?"

"I don't know," said Xander. "I don't...I don't think so." He took another breath. "But it's not just that." He was looking to Anya and looking unnerved. "We were heading out on our trip. We thought maybe a storm was coming in. But it was like night outside. Is. And on the way across town..." He broke off, and Anya picked up the thread.

"There are spotlights in the sky. Army trucks out on the streets. It's crazy. We saw demons and vampires wandering around, just--" She hesitated with arms wrapped around herself, and made a helpless flipping gesture with one hand.

"Partying," Xander said grimly. "And preying."

"Praying?" asked Dawn with an anxious facade of hope. "Like, kneeling and churchy and saying the 'Our Father' praying?"

"No," Xander replied. His voice was quiet. "The other kind."

Buffy suddenly strode through the knot of her friends to the door, opened it and stepped out. The others followed, clustering around her on the front porch. It was eight in the morning and the sky was pitch black, and cutting across that blackness above the roofs was a spotlight. The sharp pulse of a chopper filtered to her for a moment, then faded. Lights were on all down the street, and here and there people stood on their lawns, neighbors grouped and talking with each other.

"Look," said Dawn, and Buffy's head turned in the direction she pointed, to the house next door. A strange truck sat in the drive and all the lights were ablaze, including a few kliegs on the grass that had never been there before. "Do you think the Martinsons are okay? We should go check, right?"

"Get inside, Dawn." Her sister's face was stark and wide-eyed, but she obeyed without protest as Buffy turned to the others. "I'm going to go next door and see what's up. The rest of you wait here."

"I'll come with," Xander said firmly.

Buffy nodded, and they walked with swishing sounds across the dewy grass, past the hedges that
needed trimming, under the tree where no one lurked in wait for her. Thin birdsong fed the darkness, and the air held a pre-dawn chill long past the hour when dawn should have come. The lights next door were sharp and bright; the front door closed. Buffy exchanged a brief look with Xander as they approached, then rang the bell. After a minute, the door opened a crack and Mrs Martinson peered out at them. She didn't seem to recognize Buffy immediately.

"Mrs Martinson, hi." Buffy offered a smile but kept alert. "We saw your lights on. We thought we'd come over and see if everything was all right."

"Oh," the woman said, drawing the word out slowly as if struggling to connect it to her thoughts. "Oh...Buffy, isn't it? Yes. W-we're fine." In contrast to her nervous words and the tight, strained mask of her face, her eyes pleaded. She might not even have realized they were communicating independently of her.

"Yeah? 'Cause you have all these lights on your lawn." Xander tipped his head in the direction of the kliegs without moving his gaze from hers. "A little early Christmas decoration?"

"Christmas," echoed the woman blankly. Silence stretched.

"Can we come in?" Buffy finally asked.

Mrs Martinson seemed momentarily stunned witless by this suggestion, then stammered, "I, I don't--it's not a good time. No. We're having breakfast."

"Okay." Buffy smiled. "We'll come back later." She held her wide, forceful smile until Mrs Martinson closed the door on them.

"I'm thinking she's got company for breakfast," said Xander.

"I'm thinking we should join them." Buffy drew back and side-kicked the door, which flew back off its hinges with an impressive crash. There was a chance her neighbor had been behind it, but better odds that the grunting underneath the splintered wood came from something else entirely; confirmed when she spotted Mrs Martinson standing off to the side, one hand raised to her throat in shock. Buffy shoved the door to one side and yanked up the figure underneath, a uniformed demon struggling to unholster a gun.

"Buffy!" Xander cried, and there was a flurry of movement and the bang of a weapon going off in close quarters.

She drove her fist sharply into the demon's throat, heard a crunch and let him drop, whirling with a sense of desperation almost before he'd fallen. Xander was struggling wildly with another demon, their hands locked around a gun pointed first at the wall, then at the ceiling, then down again. Another shot went off, the bullet smacking into plaster. She leapt to help, edging Xander aside to let him deal with the gun while she knocked one leg out from under the demon. He half-collapsed to the ground, still trying to wrest the weapon from Xander while Buffy punched him in the face repeatedly. Wordless wails from Mrs Martinson stitched into the furor of grunts and Xander's breathless curses, but she ignored it all. When she'd finished off the demon with a neck crack, the keening continued, punctuating the sudden silence.

"Xander," she said. He got up, the gun still clutched in his hand, and tried to calm the woman.

Buffy left them and searched the rest of the house quickly. The downstairs was empty, and she began heading upstairs.

"Robin," the woman said, his name a frantic whimper.
"Your son--he's up there?" said Buffy, looking up toward the landing. The woman nodded. "Are there more of them?" She nodded again, fingers pressed to her lips, eyes wet. Xander had an arm around her shoulders; he held out his free hand, turning the gun around butt-first to offer it to Buffy. She shook her head once from habit, then held his fear-bright eyes and felt something inside her shift. This was a whole different ballgame. Bending over the first demon she'd killed, she unholstered his gun and flicked the safety off. It had been a while since she'd handled one, and it didn't quite fit her hand, but she thought she'd remember what to do.

Upstairs, she moved cautiously from door to door, listening for movement. Only one door was open, and she paused there at the master bedroom. A man's body slumped on the floor against the bed, eyes open and unseeing, blood spattered across his white tee-shirt and boxers. He still grasped a handful of bedding, pulled from the mattress where he'd fallen. The carpet was green, the blood already drying darkly on its surface. Buffy continued down the hall, reaching what had to be Robin's room. A poster was tacked to the door, some cartoony kid thing, and under it a crayoned picture on pink construction paper. Tension leaked from around the door, a thickness of fear and danger. Gunshots, she realized. Whoever was inside was warned and would have a gun trained on Robin.

Dawn had babysat Robin once or twice, before the Martinsons learned of the Summers' neighborhood reputation and looked elsewhere for a sitter. All Buffy could think to do was break into the room for a rescue. But if she that did she'd probably get Robin killed. Tucking the gun into the small of her back, she retraced her steps to the bathroom and quietly pushed up the window. She crawled through to the roof and edged over toward the bedroom. Through the parted curtains she could see a demon standing in the middle of the room with his arm wrapped around the boy's throat, a gun pointing to his head. His back was to her as he watched the door.

She took a deep breath and drew out her own gun. Feet wedged more firmly into the gutter, she placed the gun barrel against the glass and then tapped with her free hand. As soon as the demon began to turn with his gun arm raised she shot high. The bullet went clean into the side of his head and he fell to his knees. Robin screamed and dashed from the room. Smart kid.

A few minutes later Buffy was back inside and downstairs. Mrs Martinson sat sobbing quietly on her couch with Robin in her arms, enfolded so completely he was nearly invisible.

"Look at this," Xander said, easing Buffy over to the dining room table where a radio of some kind had been set up, the remains of an abandoned breakfast scattered around it. "Short-wave radio," he told her. "Looks like army issue, but it's really crazy old. Like, fifty years maybe." His brows were lifted with interest as he examined it.

Buffy couldn't get too excited, but it would probably be useful. "Bring it with us," she said, and went back into the living room. "Mrs Martinson, did the dem--the soldiers tell you anything, like why they were here?"

"They had papers. They said our house was being common." She paused to swallow; her eyes looking crazier, and Buffy frowned in confusion. "Commandeered," the woman finished after a moment. "I don't know what they were. I don't know what--what were they?"

"It doesn't matter. You need to leave." Buffy made her voice authoritative. "Take Robin, pack a bag and get out of here."

Mrs Martinson stared at her, dazed and obviously not getting it. "And go where? Doug is...I have to call the police. I can't leave my home."

"Not your home," Buffy said, her face setting into grim lines. "Sunnydale."
By the time they got back to the house, the others had dressed and the smell of fresh coffee hung in
the air. Everyone was in the living room, tensely perched on the edge of their seats. They looked
up as a group when Buffy and Xander came in. Xander set the radio down on the coffee table.

"How are they?" Dawn asked, staring at the radio and guns. Buffy could see her trying to make
sense of them, and tucked her weapon away. "What happened?"

It seemed pointless to mince words. "Mister Martinson is dead," she informed them flatly. "There
were demons wearing uniforms and carrying guns. They'd taken over the house and they shot him."

"Oh my god," Tara whispered, face twisting in sympathetic pain.

"Looks like our invasion has lift-off," Xander said. He began to pace, running a hand across his
hair. He still held the gun in the other, pointed toward the floor but dangerously ready. Dawn's
gaze was locked on it, and it occurred to Buffy that this might be the very gun that had killed
Martinson.

"Xander," she said, and nodded at the weapon. He held it up as if seeing it for the first time, then
shoved it into one pocket in a strangely assured way.

"The phone lines are dead," Willow told them in a low voice. "We tried to call Angel, but there's no
dial tone. No TV or radio reception either."

"I knew it," Xander said fiercely. "They've hit everything at once. Next thing you know, they'll cut
the power."

They all froze, waiting for his jinx to trigger the inevitable black-out, but as the moments ticked
away none came and eventually they relaxed back into a shaky status quo.

"Okay," said Buffy, "Let's not panic."

"Actually, I think now is a highly appropriate time to panic," Anya rejoined. "The world has been
invaded, I'm missing my trip to see California's scenic coastal wonders, and the Magic Box is
probably being looted as we speak--speak and sit here on our duffs."

"Looted?" Willow said sharply, turning to Tara. A significant look passed between the witches.
"We have to get down there and, and...save the magic."

Anya seemed mollified. "That's very thoughtful."

"Look." Buffy moved into the center of the room, the better to loom over them. "We can't just rush
out of here without a plan. We need to reach Angel and Giles, and we need to get Dawn out of
town."

"No way!" Dawn said shrilly, leaping up from the couch with fists clenched. Her face was tear-
streaked. Buffy hadn't even noticed she'd been crying until now. "You can't make me go! You can't
just--"

Buffy overrode her protests: "Angel will put you up if Dad's not in town."
"I'm sick of being kicked out whenever--"

"Dawn, this isn't the time for--"

"--you want to play the hero. You're such a control freak, and I'm tired of being your bi--"

"--you to act out your poor-little-me role and don't you dare say--"

"Hey!" Xander shouted, inserting himself into the charged air between them and slicing the air with the side of his hand. "Enough." His face was white, tense.

Startled and embarrassed at the spectacle she'd made, Buffy forced herself stand down. She took a deep breath before turning back to face the others. "We don't know what's going on out there, but we're going to need help. Someone needs to head to L.A. with Dawn."

"Anya." Xander looked her way. "You should go."

"Buffy." Willow's reedy voice rose from the other side of the room, slowly capturing everyone's attention. Heads swiveled like keys in reluctant locks. "Buffy, I need to...I, I think you should know..." She swallowed and kindled her hands against her knees.

Buffy leashed her impatience. "Know what?"

"I, the invasion. I--"

The front door crashed inward along with the windows. Dawn screamed and Anya flung herself sideways with glass splashing across her blouse and hair as uniformed demons filled the room on all sides, front and back, and Willow and Tara were jumping to their feet, Xander pulling out his gun, Buffy spinning to face the nearest opponent on pure instinct, but she fell back with a gasp at the array of weaponry trained on them. Fighting her own reflexes instead of the demons, she held perfectly still. One impetuous move and they could all die. Dawn could die.

Buffy shifted on her feet and flung a quick glance over her shoulder, confirming the presence of more soldiers behind them who must have entered from the kitchen. They were surrounded and vastly outnumbered. Braving herself, she faced off with the nearest demon, lifting her chin and toughening her stance. "What is this?" she challenged.

The demon had a grey and weirdly lumpy face, as if a blistering rash were rising up from under his skin. Ropy lines of cartilage descended along his temples to his cheeks like curlicued vines. He wore a grey uniform like the others, but with black and silver trim and a cap, and he was the only one not carrying a rifle, though he had a pistol in his holster. If you went by the silver marks on his sleeves, he probably outranked the others.

"Buffy Summers," he said. It wasn't a question, and it wasn't even clear that he was speaking to her. "Slayer." He took a notebook from his pocket and consulted it. "Dawn Summers. Sister." He made two tick-marks on the paper, then his cold, dark-eyed glance swept across the rest of the room dismissively. "The others are of collateral importance. Take them all. Shoot them if necessary. But try not to damage the rugs."

He turned and walked away before Buffy had a chance to react. "Hey," she called after him. The spirit of rebellion was too ingrained to submit without protest, but the demon left without responding.

"If you come quietly to detention," rasped one of the remaining soldiers, "we won't have to kill you. And we will damage the rugs, if necessary." He nodded curtly at another demon, who
grabbed Dawn and jabbed his gun in her side.

Buffy felt coldness wash over her, a slapping wave of rage and fear. She held Dawn's gaze a moment with silent reassurance, then looked at everyone else. Their expressions were shocked, torn. Of all of them, Willow was most clearly thinking of taking action. Buffy could see it in the speculative lines of her face, the cat-like flexing of her hands.

"We'll come quietly," Buffy said, staring at Willow until the other woman met her eyes and acknowledged the futility of making a stand like this. Not here, not now.

The soldiers herded them together, divested them of guns and handcuffed their wrists behind them. Outside, an uncovered army truck idled in the street, chugging exhaust into the dark, cool morning. They were marched across the yard, their bodies jostling. Anya's arm bumped hers. "Sorry," she murmured to Buffy out of polite habit. Fear raised the pitch of her voice.

"It'll be okay," Buffy said. Wet grass slithered under their shoes. People in yards up and down the street watched from their lawns, unmoving, like bystanders at an accident. A mingled sense of relief and fear squeezed the breath from Buffy's lungs as she understood she'd been singled out. Whatever was happening, some people were being spared, at least for now. She couldn't blame her neighbors for their inaction. Demon soldiers with guns in hand paced the street, watchful for any resistance or interference.

When they'd nearly reached the truck, there was a sudden flurry of mad barking. Demons and humans both halted abruptly and Buffy watched in alarm as a dog raced down the street, a blur of golden speed heading for the line of soldiers. Somewhere a child's voice cried out in distress: "Spirit, Spirit! No!"

A soldier raised his gun. A pause, horrible and silent and still, stretched between the moment he took careful aim and the moment when the shot rang out. The dog dropped with a yelp to the pavement and writhed there. Raucous laughter rippled through the soldiers.

"Oh my god," said Xander in a hush. "Oh my god."

Don't panic, Buffy reminded herself, staring at the dog as it tried to drag itself upright and failed. Its cries spiraled eerily into the darkness.

Let's not panic.
stairwells that linked the floors of books. In Lal's experience, vampires weren't particularly bookish, but after one particularly long absence, he'd gone looking and found Spike cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by unshelved volumes of poetry, most torn to pieces. Nose in a book, cigarette dangling loosely from his mouth, he'd glanced up at Lal's bewildered survey and growled, "Bleedin' hacks like this don't deserve immortality." And rip went another spine.

Now Spike was pacing the check-out lobby and playing with things, which made Lal uneasy. He'd emptied what little change was in the cash register, drawn an intricate and perverted design on the counter with a date stamper, dumped a few card catalog drawers, and spun a giant free-standing globe long enough to abrade Lal's nerves down to nothing. He had found scissors and seemed very interested in them. That couldn't be good. Lal wished Clude would return.

The demon surreptitiously eyed the twenty-foot high windows and their custom-fit shades, then eased over and peeked out. He smiled. It had come then. Day was night, and Sunnydale was theirs. Their reign had begun.

"What are we lookin' at, oh pal o' mine?"

Spike's silken voice at his shoulder made Lal jump and drop the shade. "Nothing," he replied, surly. "And my name is 'Lal', not 'Pal.'"

Not listening to him, Spike relifted the shade and gazed into the darkness. "Here," he said sharply. "What time is it?"

"Eight twenty-five," said Lal with precision, after checking his watch.

Eyebrows arched. "Er, yeahhhhh. Thing is, there's usually a great ball of fire hanging up there, baning my existence. Blue sky, fluffy clouds, picture postcard from hell?" The vampire gestured at the window with one white, eloquent hand as if to illustrate the missing fluffiness.

"All gone now," Lal said, feeling the triumph of his people. "The invasion has begun. Our forces rise to power, bringing subjugation and terror to the race of man."

"You don't say." Spike tilted his head and gazed at him keenly. Lal couldn't read his face. It was cold and dead and expressionless, shadows gathering to obscure whatever was behind his eyes. "Sounds delightful," he said. "The kind of party I wouldn't want to miss." He began walking off.

"No, wait! You can't leave." Lal hurried after him. "The Colonel is expecting you. He's an extremely important man!" He touched Spike's arm and the vampire whirled and uttered a low growl. Lal fell back a step.

"So am I," Spike said. Fed and fired up, he abandoned his minder without a backward look. Thoughts of Buffy nagged at his mind, but what really drove him out was his own fascination to see the mantle of night that had fallen over the earth. If he'd been able to feed, this would have been an occasion to remember for years to come.

He'd just reached the pillared foyer when the heavy doors banged open and a company of demons poured in. Various uniformed soldiers held the doors wide and took sentry positions; others carried in heavy boxes and swept past him on either side with official briskness. After the first bewildering deluge, another figure appeared, stepping across the threshold and coming toward Spike with a smile.

_Nazi_, thought Spike. He wore a sharper version of the grey uniform and a black cloak, and despite looking not at all human, he carried the same air of supercilious authority worn by pasty Germans
sixty years past. When the cloak was thrown back--dramatic bugger--the homage to the party couldn't be mistaken: red armband with some swirly demon sigil, and what looked to be a man-made gun snuggled to the hip.

"You must be Spike," said the demon, drawing off his leather gloves but not offering his hand. "I'm Colonel Liyoge."

Caught somewhat off guard, Spike grudgingly nodded. "Charmed," he said, walking a fine line between sarcasm and manners. Playing it close to the vest seemed suddenly wise.

"Pardon me a moment," the colonel said to Spike, before turning to an aide who'd materialized at his side. "Set up a temporary office on this floor and have Sergeant Nemyn begin rounding up our candidates. I want to begin interviewing by twelve hundred hours. Officers this afternoon, so have a lunch buffet set up. We'll be seeing the rank and file in groups tomorrow. No buffet."

"What about barracks for the inductees?" the aide asked, scribbling notes on his clipboard.

"They're converting the dorms. The sergeant will have more information."

Spike listened with growing wonder, mind traveling across campus as he envisioned the masses of spoiled, sulky youth being pried screaming from their cozy dorm rooms to make way for an army of demon soldiers. It was an appealing image. He eyeballed Liyoge with a new and warier degree of respect, beginning to realize the scale of what was taking place. Sun struck from the sky, a university campus seized--

"Well then," said Liyoge, focusing on Spike again. "Have you had breakfast? Yes? Good. Come, let's talk." He strolled through the library, gaze stabbing left and right as he assessed his surroundings. "This will need to be completely redecorated," he sighed, inviting commiseration. "American architecture is a travesty that has laid waste to the inherited style and wisdom of the ancients."

"I've often thought that meself," Spike said with a straight face, eyes slitted watchfully as he tried to suss out just how big a ponce he was dealing with.

Liyoge chuckled. "Oh, I know when I'm being mocked. But I'm used to it. Architecture is my passion. How grand it would have been, had the current Hellmouth been located in Rome or Paris. To devote one's life to remaking such cities...." He shook his head and entered an office that already showed signs of being refashioned for his occupancy. Taking a seat behind the glossy desk, he paused with a frown and rubbed his gloves across a scratch on its surface. Spike sat down across from him, crossing his legs and leaning back in a pose of indifference.

"So," said Liyoge, steepling his hands and giving Spike his attention. "You've heard our offer."

"Yeah."

"Are you interested?"

"Might be."

Liyoge smiled, and they matched gazes for a long silent minute as another aide entered and set a coffee tray on the desk. He also handed over a black leather-bound folder, which the colonel opened and read from. "You may go," he said absently. The aide finished pouring the coffee and slipped out, closing the door behind him. "You've made a long and colorful history for yourself, William the Bloody. Your death toll is more than respectable for your age, and includes two
slayers--you're the only vampire extant who can claim such a distinction." Liyoge looked up. "I understand it would be three, if not for an unfortunate...operation." The last word was spoken delicately.

"If you know that, then why are you so interested in me?" Spike asked, eyes narrowing.

"A vampire unable to feed must bear a great deal of hatred." The colonel smiled easily. "Surely you've proven that, considering your efforts against the local demon population."

So much for any pretense at cover. "You know a lot about me. I'm a fangless beggar who fights for the wrong side. Must admit I still can't see the attraction for," Spike's eyes flicked over the demon's uniform, "your sort."

"William--"

"Spike."

"William," Liyoge repeated with emphasis, holding Spike's eyes with a mesmerizing force he'd barely hinted at before now. "We think you'd be...very valuable to our cause. You have special gifts, and a willingness to use them." He leaned forward, hands clasped. "Why do you think 'our sort' is here?"

"Kill humans, take over the world, yadda bloody yadda."

"Half right. Humans have their uses. For now. Many of the tainted races sadly do not. The Grauth have been chosen by the Powers to rule the next great age of earth. It is the destiny for which we have long prepared ourselves. From the secret depths of hell, we've planned, studied, made ourselves ready. And now we've come forth to claim our birthright, as promised to us. You can imagine the jealousy and misunderstandings our rule will engender in the lower orders of demons. This is why we need someone like you, who knows this town and its clans. Someone willing to help us control them, guide them...cull them."

Spike blinked, adjusting to this new slant on things. "So this demon-friendly Age of Aquarius that's bein' touted all over town--"

"Just a little helpful propaganda. Not that we don't have a place for those who recognize their own."

"And what's my place to be then?" Spike asked with an edge of menace.

Unexpectedly, Liyoge ran an approving eye over Spike's features. "Our position for you would be in Special Forces. You exemplify the sort of allies we do want to cultivate. We appreciate your...style."

"My style?" Spike repeated, brows rising in amazement. "You're recruiting me to your great evil cause for my fashion sense?" Barking mad, they were.

"And your propensity for indiscriminate violence." Liyoge took a leisurely sip of coffee. "So then. Do we have a deal?" As Spike silently weighed his options, another Grauth burst into the room after a perfunctory rattling knock. "I'm in a meeting," the colonel said sharply.

"Sorry, sir." The soldier held out a sheaf of papers and a pen. "Need your approval to deploy a crew of ten to assist in converting the mayoral offices for General Nilec's use."

"By Sytos, is he raiding the ranks already?" Liyoge grumbled. "The man is shameless." But he
signed with an irritable scribble.

"Unexpected skirmish with the human army, sir. Lost some men. But victory was ours."

Bloody christ, thought Spike in shock. They're taking the town. He'd known it, but some part of him had resisted understanding. This new evidence hit home. Somewhere out there Buffy was trying to fight this, surprised and vastly outnumbered. Needing him. As the foot-soldier scurried out with his signature, Spike looked at Liyoge. "What about the slayer?" he heard himself say before he could stop the words.

"The slayer?" Liyoge paused, coffee cup raised halfway to his mouth. "Dead by now, I expect." His tone was matter-of-fact. "Good news for you. I gather she'd become a very personal torment to you, as nemeses go." He clucked in sympathy before finishing his sip.

After the first spasm of fear passed, Spike's temper flared, then flattened to coldness. No way was Buffy Summers dead, certainly not if gits like this underestimated her. He made his decision at that moment. "A shame to hear, actually. I'd have liked to get in one last shag." He threw this out deliberately to see how Liyoge reacted. "She was a hot little number."

A spark of curiosity lit the colonel's eyes, but there was something closed and speculative in his face that said Spike might have just been tested himself. "Indeed? Then it's true about your relationship."

"Relationship?" Spike scoffed. "Dunno if you'd call it that. Bitch kept me on leash like a whipped dog. Taught me all sorts of new tricks, though. Tell you a secret--slayer's a lot closer to our sort than they'd have you think. I'd have cleaned her boots with my tongue if she told me too. Did a few times, if you want the truth. Like a thrall, it was." He emasculated himself with savage cheer, steadily holding Liyoge's gaze the entire time.

"Well, well. She sounds...intriguing. I'm sorry to have missed the opportunity to meet her."

"Don't lose sleep, mate. Deadly as an asp. Not a girl you'd want to meet in a dark alley."

"She let you live."

"On my knees," said Spike, and smiled suggestively. "She liked me there." He uncrossed his legs and stretched, finding a more comfortable position that incidentally showed off his body. When a bugger wanted a piece of you, it paid to know which piece. "What about you?" he said. He let a beat pass, watching the demon's gaze narrow. "Still want me on your team?"

Liyoge rose and came around the desk, drawing Spike instinctively to his feet. The demon held out his hand. "Absolutely, Captain. Captain--?"

Spike frowned a moment at the unspoken question, then his faced cleared into a sharp-edged smile. He clasped Liyoge's hand. "Captain Aurelius. William Aurelius. At your service."

The truck rolled unhurriedly through the dark streets, taking them on a tour of chaos. Xander craned his neck as they turned onto Arrowhead, oddly desperate to know whether his parents had
made it out. His childhood house was lit up like the others on its block, both cars parked neatly in
the drive, the curtains closed. Relief hit him the same moment as resentment. He could picture
them all too well, couch-sitting the TV—wait, no reception, scratch that—no, wait, they'd still be
planted in front of the dead TV, hoping it would come on and feed their empty heads. And they'd
be drinking already, and arguing like crazy. Whether to leave or stay. They'd argue to stalemate
and they'd sit there, grudging each other's existence and not speaking, while outside the world
crashed down around them.

"Your parents," said Willow softly. A strand of red hair whipped into his face, smelling of girly
apple shampoo; they were so close their cheeks were almost touching. She watched with him as his
house was left behind.

"Probably haven't even noticed yet that an invasion's taking place outside their windows." His
frustration bubbled up. "God, why aren't they getting the hell out?" It couldn't be that they were
worried about him; they wouldn't stay for that.

"Maybe they will." Her voice lapped at him, reminding him of old closeness. "Maybe they tried."
Minty. She'd taken time to brush his teeth. A part of his mind noticed this even as the rest of it ran
around flapping and chicken-like inside his skull. Feathers of thought drifting everywhere up there.
Cool breeze ruffling her hair and his. It was a hayride without the hay. He shifted back to look
around the truck's stark interior. On the opposite bench sat Buffy, Dawn, and Anya. Tara was on
his side, at the far end. None of them were sitting together. The truck had been filling up with other
prisoners, stop by stop, and the soldiers had assigned seats at random. Xander didn't recognize any
of the new arrivals. They were at full capacity now; and at each end of the truck demons were
braced with guns ready.

"What about your parents?" he asked Willow, as his distracting thoughts criss-crossed each other.

"They--they're in Boston for a conference. I'm so sorry, Xander. I'm so sorry."

Xander glanced sideways at the guilt-filled apology. She was sniffing, tears slipping free. "It's
okay, Will. It's good that they missed this." He wished he could pat her hands or shoulder or
something. The cuffs on his wrists chafed, and kept scraping the side of the truck behind him.

Willow began to sob in quiet misery, head hanging to her chest and hair swinging forward to
obscure her face. Anger swept through Xander and he fixed his attention on the demons at the rear
of the truck. Grey-faced and stolid, the one across from him stared back. After several moments, he
lowered his gun and pointed it at Xander's chest. Xander didn't immediately look away, but then
heard Buffy say his name and forced himself to. Good little beta-male, said the mocking part of his
brain. The smart part shot back: why die now, for no reason?

Pride. It might actually be the death of him.

He turned his head and looked out over the edge of the truck again. Two boys on bicycles suddenly
appeared, racing them along the curb, pedaling quickly and then falling back. Only young kids,
like the ones he used to sell ice cream to, their juvenile monkey faces blank and intent. Xander
watched them until the truck pulled ahead and left them behind. They were entering the business
district now, rolling past a tiny, shabby strip of stores where he used to hang a dozen years ago--
laundromat, arcade, taco stand; past the used car lot and the pink stucco hotel that used to cater to
vacationing movie stars.

They rounded a corner, the truck rumbling into the center of town, and a wave of light splashed
across their faces. Everyone's heads turned, craning to see the source. A building was on fire--
Xander recognized it as one of the historical buildings, converted a few years back into an arts and
crafts mall that Anya resented for stealing away business. Around it lay bodies in cammo. Motionless. Human. A car, wedged and resting on its back wheels halfway through a window, seemed to be the source of the blaze.

Xander looked away when he heard the gunfire. Shouts came from the truck cab as they revved forward, and the guards behind them stirred, murmuring and training their guns more closely on the prisoners. The cracking exchange of shots grew louder; a few people began to cry. It was hard to tell the direction of the battle, and Xander was inching up to see what he could see when an explosion reverberated, shaking the truck. Most of the prisoners folded instinctively, covering their ears. Fresh cries and babble rose as the noise faded, and the guards barked warnings and fired shots into the bed of the truck between their feet.

The driver rolled forward steadily, carrying them away from the town center, and soon they took a new turn, heading down a narrow road with no houses. The only buildings here were small plain boxes, surrounded by chain-link fencing and piles of machinery. Hubcap sales. Auto-body repair. Junk yards.

"They're taking us to the dump," said Xander abruptly, realizing where they had to be going. He cracked a sharp, empty laugh and stared wildly into Willow's eyes.

She drew in a breath, eyes widening. "No."

"You think they want a slayer around to stir up trouble?" he whispered fiercely. The rattle of the truck covered his words from anyone else's hearing. "We're heading to the ovens, Will. Except they probably haven't had time to get that sophisticated. We'll just dig our own ditches and then they'll shoot us and tidy up afterwards." Willow swallowed convulsively and bit her lip. Part of Xander regretted the panic his words had caused; other parts couldn't care. He was becoming schizo boy, his world hitting the fan and fracturing into a thousand pieces--then, catching Dawn's big, scared eyes across the truck, he pulled it together with a shaky breath. "We have to get out of here," he said, half to himself.

When he looked Buffy's way again, her lips were moving. For one terrible moment he thought she was praying, then understood she was trying to mouth a message to him. He couldn't read lips but now would be a really good time to learn. The truck jounced and groaned as they hit the turn-off for the dump. What was she saying? Die? Yeah, he knew that, thanks. No, wait. More. Die...virgin? Befuddled, he shook his head minutely. What the...oh. Diversion. He nodded and then spared a covert glance at the guard to see if he'd caught anything, but he was merely eating a strip of licorice and staring out into the unnatural night like a tourist.

Low-hanging trees branches whipped by their heads, and then the truck was slowing. Breathe, Xander reminded himself, as his pulse began to race against its own best time. The truck ground to a halt, engine still running, and the demons hopped off, taking a moment to josh each other in some incomprehensible way before lowering the rear flap and waving Xander and the others off the truck. He made a head-count as he was prodded ungently along the rutted earth. Four, six, seven...ten. Not a hell of a lot; they were outnumbered by their own prisoners. Stupid demons. With big scary guns.

"Look," said Willow, bumping at his shoulder. He followed her gaze and saw a bulldozer. The stolen one, it had to be. Next to it was an excavator--guess they'd missed a theft report on that--and near both machines sat piled dirt from a long ditch, deeper than he'd pictured it in his head. A few tall lamps illuminated the killing ground; beyond their range hills of garbage could be dimly made out. They'd thought matters out ahead of time pretty well after all.

"My god, they're going to kill us and bury us here," he heard Anya say in a high anxious voice. She
didn't deal well with her own impending death. Or his. He turned his head, caught Buffy's eye
again.

Die. Version.

Quelling fear, Xander looked around the lot they were crossing. How do you make a diversion
when you're surrounded by monsters with guns and your hands are cuffed behind you?

"I'm going to make a diversion," Willow said near his ear, just as he said, "Diversion," to her out of
the corner of his mouth. They exchanged a startled glance, and Xander nodded.

Willow called to the nearest soldier: "Hey, you. In the grey." The demon glanced at her in faint
puzzlement. "I don't think you picked your burial grounds very well. You know that this place is
the breeding--uh, feeding ground for the, uh, Giant Hellbeast of Sunnydale."

Oh yeah, thought Xander in admiration. This is what we call winging it. Don't try this at home,
kids. "Nocturnal, isn't it?" he asked, pretending to look around nervously. "It's gotta be lovin' this
endless night thing you've got going on. Hey, what's that over there?" At his side he felt a humming
charge that made the hairs on his arms stand up. Ozone crackled off Willow's body. "Over there!"
he repeated urgently.

The demons began muttering and peering into the darkness, and then a roar filled the night, so
impressively loud Xander felt like Jurassic Park was coming to life around him. Screams rose from
the prisoners and a flailing surge of bodies began breaking apart the convoy as the demons turned
back and forth, trying simultaneously to keep them in place and see what was coming for them.
Crashing sounds in the brush mixed with cracks nearby--not bullets but bones. Slayer kicks hitting
home, he was sure, and in good faith he dove forward, sending a guard crashing to the ground.
Latin rose around him in nonsensical syllables from familiar voices and suddenly his handcuffs fell
open.

Under him the guard writhed. Xander scrabbled against his prone body, pulling himself upright far
enough to begin punching his head. The impact of fist on bone made him suck air through his
teeth, then he lost his balance, bucked off onto the ground and rolled under the weight of the
demon's body. He grabbed an arm that was shoving a gun to his throat, heard a stammer of gun
shots somewhere behind him and then more rising Latin, followed by a clatter as the magazine slid
from the weapon he struggled to control. Nice.

A minute later he'd pummeled his demon into unconsciousness and, kneeling to catch his breath,
was able to take stock. Most of the civilians--no better word for them--were huddled in a daze of
confusion, though a few had clearly taken part in the melee. New wounds were visible among them
and two women lay on the ground, gasping, shirts drenched in blood. He couldn't quite take it in. It
was sick, it was like...war.

No. Not like war. It was war.

He looked at Willow and Buffy. Both seemed uncharacteristically lost; they were staring in a zone
of horror at the dying women while others knelt by them in the muddy ground, uselessly trying to
staunch their wounds. Anya, tearing her gaze away to scan the edge of the clearing, asked, "That
roar wasn't attached to anything real, right?" No one replied.

Quietly, Xander reloaded the gun at hand, then slung it across his shoulder and stood. "We have to
get out of here," he said as Anya picked her way over and hugged him in merciful silence.

Buffy blinked free of her stasis. "And go where?" Any doubt from her threatened to swamp them
all, and Xander took a breath and spoke even more calmly.

"Anywhere. They might be planning to use this place again. Other trucks could be on their way. If we stay off the road, cut through the fields, we should be able to make our way back into town."

She nodded, shaking off her momentary lapse. Xander could practically see authority return in how she straightened her body, and he felt a great wash of relief that he wasn't going to have to be guy-in-charge.

"Okay," she said. "We'll take the guns. And we should check the bodies for anything useful."

"They're not all dead," Tara pointed out hesitantly. "Should we...we have the cuffs. Should we tie them up?"

"No," said Xander, before Buffy could reply. "We shouldn't." He turned and in quick, smooth movements slid the gun down his arm, flicked off the safety, and fired several rounds into the unconscious form. It jerked slightly as the bullets entered, and spent shells bounced around his own feet. He stopped firing and met Tara's shocked eyes. Immediately, he put the brake on his anger—it wasn't aimed at her—but his voice still came out in a rough grind. "We aren't up against the Joker here. No Biff! Bam! Ka-Pow! We aren't going to have any narrow escapes from the giant saw and we don't recycle the bad guys for next week's show. We get the chance, we kill them." He looked around grimly. "Anyone want to debate?"

No one said anything, and Xander moved to the next body. The demon groaned and opened its eyes as he loomed over it. It stared at him, dark eyes glazed over to unreadability, and he shot it with only the smallest flinch and feeling of nausea.

He'd get over that soon enough. He knew he would.

"Quite the kit," Spike said, adjusting his gold and enamel cuff-links and smoothing down the sleeves of his jacket until only a proper inch of white silk cuff showed. And then, as if the uniform demanded manners, added: "Well done."

Nodding with agreeable deference, the tailor unwrapped the measuring tape from around his neck and began coiling it. "A privilege, sir." He cleared his throat. "Would you like to see the full effect?"

Spike turned his head exactly thirty degrees and stared at the demon. "Beg pardon?" The tailor pulled a sheet from what was revealed to be a full-length standing mirror. Annoyed at the man's idiocy, Spike opened his mouth to snipe, then caught a flash of movement in the glass. He stared at a pair of startled eyes and foolish face, thought, Who is that gaping git? and abruptly closed his mouth. The git closed his. "Bloody hell," the two of him said.

"Mirror of Monarog, crafted by the Artisans of Reflection. Imported especially for you, sir, or so I'm given to understand."

Walking up to the mirror, Spike gazed at himself in narcissistic wonder until he nearly smacked into his reflection. Nose to nose with himself, he touched the surface suspiciously, but it felt like
any other mirror. Maybe a little colder. He stepped back a few paces and gave himself a more
critical inspection. The black wool uniform fit like a second skin, the tunic collar hiding the shirt
underneath. He hoped it was magically unwrinkly. Silver piping and buttons and belt buckle, stiff
shoulderboards showing off his rank, snazzy collar tabs and trim red arm band...yeah, he'd been
fitted pretty. The tailor extended the cap to him and Spike put it on with both hands, adjusting it to
shade his eyes. Their arctic blue glinted out from the mirror.

It was hard to tear his gaze away. He rested his hand on the holstered gun at his hip, smiled as he
relished the effect, and for the first time in over a century truly understood why he frightened the
horses. "Make a right precious Nazi, don't I?"

"Yes, sir."

The mirror scowled. "Hated those buggers with a passion."

"Of course, sir."

The door of the office opened and Colonel Liyoge walked in. "Spectacular," he said, looking Spike
over from cap to boots. "Men will cower before you, women swoon. I expect you're eager to get
started. We've certainly got plenty for you to do. Let's not waste any time, shall we?" He turned and
snapped his fingers, and two guards came in, dragging a woman between them.

Girl, really, thought Spike. Just some anonymous terrified co-ed with rumpled hair and a gag in her
mouth, wearing fuzzy UC Sunnydale sweats. Spike swallowed, captivated by her fear and
becoming aware of what it meant for him.

"We'll forego the usual rigmarole," said Liyoge, drawing a small black book from his pocket.
"Come." Spike moved closer and the demon took his hand and placed it on the book, covering it
with his own. "Empowered by Sytos and the Imperial Lords of Grauth, I hereby appoint you a
captain in service of the Reich. You are charged to execute the duties of that position until such a
time as your usefulness ends. Do you give your oath to serve?"

Spike hesitated, stealing a tense glance at the girl, who was watching the ceremony with spaniel-
eyed incomprehension. There was no way this ended well for her. Of course, if he said no, there
was no way it ended well for him. Not a hard choice. So he wasn't sure why it was. "I give my
oath," he said at last, doing no such thing. But cheating the Grauth of his honor brought little joy.
He watched in silence, a dreadful darkness rising inside him as a guard yanked off the girl's gag.
She whimpered and began begging in a dry voice for her life. Nothing new or special. Nothing he
hadn't heard before.

"A celebratory drink," said Liyoge, watching him as closely as he was watching the girl. "In honor
of your appointment." Spike felt the demon's gaze trying to drill inside his head. Clearly the oath
meant nothing until he'd proved himself callous of human life. He'd palled around with a slayer and
her friends for years, and every snitch in town knew it. Bloody amazing he'd been trusted this far.
At his slow nod of acquiescence, the guard repositioned the captive.

Spike closed his eyes briefly as the girl's neck was cracked. The sound went straight to his fangs
and he could feel his body flood with liquid fire, that was how bad he wanted it. Stony-faced, he
accepted the dead weight of her body, turned himself inside out, and drank.

"I didn't kill her, Buffy. He groaned into the nameless neck, feeding with a hunger so violent it felt
like a higher power ripping through his body, taking him over from within. Nothing I could have
done for her, Slayer. But haunted by the loathing on her face he tore his mouth away with a growl and dropped the corpse, appetite more whetted than sated. It wasn't his fucking kill and his pleasure already tasted sour and cheap. He'd done what he had to, that's all. He was a soldier now, wasn't he. And this was war.

Spike opened his eyes and saw himself in the mirror, a monster dressed to kill in the parody of humanity's own greatest evil. His face slipped away to leave an angelic, more familiar mask. The demon in him loathed its softness, and he was that demon.

But mirrors never did tell the truth.

Tara had been handed a gun, expected to carry it. And she was. She cradled it awkwardly, like a swaddled baby or a pig, and tramped through the tall grass behind the others. Xander was the only one behind her, and she imagined she could feel his eyes laserimg the back of her neck. She wasn't sure she wanted him behind her with a gun right now. It was a shameful thought, but he'd shot the demon soldiers the way her cousins used to shoot snakes, as if it were an act you didn't have to think about or question. She'd gotten used to fighting monsters that went grr arrgh and attacked. This was different. She knew the soldiers had intended to kill them. But humans were better than demons, they had to be--so why was their retribution no better? They'd exacted the same kind of cold, easy murder the demons meant to inflict, using men's weapons.

Tara had spent most of her life believing she had demon in her, a bone-deep sickness waiting to come out, and she'd always feared she might someday go so rotten she'd have to take her dad's gun and end it. Even now it gave her the chills to think...things she shouldn't be thinking. Xander, though--he could get so ferociously worked up. How would he react when he found out about Willow's visions, that they'd known what was coming? Would it even matter now?

A sadness closer to anguish gripped her, and a simmering anger that she resisted; and fear and confusion and fear again and great Gaia, she was going to be so useless now that everything had changed. The gun was so cold and wrong in her arms.

Defying the single-file line they'd somehow fallen into, she moved up next to Willow, who gave her a tiny, crooked smile. Her eyes asked how you doin' and Tara gave a weak smile back. It was still dark, but their vision had adjusted. Ahead, Tara could see lights from town growing brighter as they neared. "I keep thinking we should have--" Tara hesitated, aware Xander might be listening. "--maybe we should have taken one of the guards with us, to question." It was the closest she could come to verbal defiance under the circumstances.

"I have a feeling we'll find more," said Willow tightly. And Tara understood that her lover's anger wasn't exactly like her own. She was nursing a savage, more righteous anger, like Xander. She wouldn't sympathize over dead demons; she wouldn't lose sleep over it. Tara dropped her gaze briefly and swallowed other words she'd nearly been about to say. "We probably should have taken the uniforms though," Willow continued with a note of regret.

"I don't think we can pass for demons," Tara said, staring ahead. "Though I suppose a glamour would be easier with uniforms. Still, we'll find more, won't we." The strained note in her voice turned bitter, and she felt rather than saw Willow look her way.
"Guys," called back Buffy. She was waving them forward; they'd reached the edge of the field. Tara stumbled a little as she stepped out, her foot dragging in a muddy rut. A good, clean smell of turned earth, reminding her of home, the way that smell always did; then she was standing on asphalt, on the service road behind some store or warehouse. She could have walked through those fields forever, let them take her right out of Sunnydale.

She was beginning to actively hate this town.

"Where are we?" asked Dawn.

"Behind the Carpet Hutch," Xander said, looking around. "We used to ride our bikes back here when we were...much younger." An odd note was in his voice. Loss of innocence.

"We were pirates," Willow confirmed. "This whole area used to be under the rule of Captain Black Jack."

"And her loyal first mate, Armando."

Uninterested in the banter, Tara took a moment to check out the condition of their tag-alongs. The five people who'd elected to come with them wore almost identical bewildered expressions. She didn't blame them. They were like primitives waking up into a city they'd never seen before, one full of monsters. Bleakly humorous by-play probably just underscored the surreality.

"What...what do we do now?" asked one of the women.

Next to her, a man kept nervously scouting the sky. Noticing, Buffy craned her head to mirror his searching gaze. "What are we looking for?" she asked.

"The aliens."

"Oh." Buffy lowered her head and rubbed her neck. "They didn't come from up there. You want to be looking south," she said helpfully.

The man blinked in confusion. "Mexico?"

"No, Hell. They're demons, not aliens. They usually do this whole voyage-from-the-center-of-the-earth thing." She paused with a frown, chasing down a stray thought. "They had to come from some hell dimension, anyway. Which is usually downward in the great cosmetic scheme of things." Her tone held no levity despite her words, and she immediately turned to Xander and Willow to add, "We should find out how they got in. If there's a portal, it might still be open."

"Don't you think we should try to get help first?" Willow said. Tara tried to hear the manipulation merely as caution. "I mean, you wanted to get Dawn out of town, Angel in."

"I'm not going," Dawn said coldly, folding her arms in a stubborn pose that any friend of Buffy's recognized all too well as a hand-me-down.

"Right," Buffy said, ignoring her. "We should find a car."

"Yeah, and someone who knows how to hotwire one," Xander looked around the group. "Anyone here spend time in juvie? Fess up now."

"Hey," said Willow, raising her hand. "Magic girl here."

Tara's eyes dropped, lip twisted, but she resolutely said nothing. There was nothing she could say
without earning everyone's resentment, couldn't raise her own hand and remind them all of Willow's tendencies and eagerness to exploit any situation where her gifts could be used; how if they weren't careful this could be the moment when her bad habit began snowballing downhill again. And she couldn't say: save it for when you really need it, sweetie. Because Willow would just argue back: *this* is when we need it, Tara.

"Let's go," said Buffy.

"Aren't we going to look a bit conspicuous?" Tara spoke up dryly, picturing them trailing along the street after Buffy like a paddle of ducklings.

"Good point. Willow and I will go. You guys wait here."

Like they had anywhere else to be.

"We need to find something racy," said Buffy, scanning the street.

Willow glanced at her. "You mean, like, red and sporty? I'm not sure we should be trying to attract attention."

"I mean like *fast.*"

"Oh, right."

"Actually, we should probably get two," Buffy added, thinking of the motley crew they'd picked up. "We don't have room for any refugees. They'll have to hoe their own row, or row their own boat. Or car. Whatever."

"It must be so weird for them. To wake up to all this. At least we had the chance to, you know, acclimatize. Start off small, a few vamps here, a few demons there, a minor apocalypse--"

"In which I *died,*" Buffy said, looking askance at her.

"Oh. Right." Willow's brow wrinkled, then cleared. "Hey, car. And it's a Ford."

Though subdued, she sounded weirdly pleased and Buffy raised her brows ironically. "Because invasion or no invasion, buy American."

"Well, steal American anyway."

"There's another," Buffy said, nodding in the direction of an unwashed sedan. She took careful looks around while Willow worked her magicks. A chopper passed by somewhere overhead, but no demon soldiers appeared, and they quickly returned to the others, driving their battered cars around the deserted block, headlights off.

"A 1972 Gran Torino," Xander breathed when he saw what Buffy was driving. "You guys are the best car thieves ever!"

"Did he just go Y-chromosome on us?" she asked her fellow females, then turned to a haggard,
quiet man she'd pegged as the natural leader for their refugees; he'd walked beside her through the fields for a stretch and asked good questions. He met her eyes now as if he'd been waiting for it.


He shifted with his gun and nodded, his old blue eyes holding hers. "Take it easy...Slayer."

Unaccountably, Buffy felt her cheeks flush. It was a first; she'd shared her secret identity with a random Joe Citizen, and it had been acknowledged without any doubts. Guess there wasn't a lot of room for doubt now in Sunnydale. Unnerving, though, that acceptance and trust; and she began worrying and second-guessing herself as he drove away with his carload of charges. She hoped she'd done right by them; done enough.

Xander clearly intended to be manly driving-man for their own car, and Buffy piled in with the others, taking the front seat next to Anya and wishing she had more space around her to think. She still didn't have a plan, but she needed to make one fast. Phone lines down, and cable and TV and--

She leaned across Anya to switch on the radio, twirled the knob to hear the squeaks and purrs of nothingness. "Static, static, and the mellow strains of more static," said Xander, eyes flicking left and right on the road. "And I need a direction here--46 or 1?"

"Low profile."

"Gotta. The scenic route it is."

Buffy turned in her seat, looking into the back. A stripe of light brushed through the car, painting their faces and passing away again. "I can't go with you guys. But I won't ask anyone to stay."

"So, what," asked Anya, "We're just dropping you by the side of the road? Where will you go? The town is overrun."

"We're not dropping her," Willow said testily. "I'm staying. We're all staying except you. You're going to L.A. with Dawn."

"I never agreed to that," Anya said. Buffy groaned inwardly. "I want to stay. It's my responsibility. I'm not abandoning it." She sounded admirably serious, but it didn't help the situation.

"An. You can't--"

"I'm staying too," Dawn interrupted. "Besides, what if they've invaded L.A.?"

There was a dense, weighted silence in which Xander looked anxiously Buffy's way and Buffy looked back, then turned her gaze toward Willow, who was exchanging a sidelong glance with Tara, their expressions uncertain. Willow shook her head a little, caught Buffy's eye, swallowed.

"Nobody thought of that, did they?" Dawn crossed her arms with cold satisfaction.

"It seems...unlikely," Buffy hedged, trying not to think of the vague prophecy that had started this all, because she so badly needed for Angel to be there for them. For her. He wasn't with them now though. It was just her, and she couldn't be--wasn't--enough. "Look, I don't know what to do here. I don't know what to do next. I need some help on this, guys. I need--"
"Holy mother of crap!" Xander yelped and the car swerved with a screech and Buffy was thrown against the door, and Anya thrown against her, and startled noises spilled from the back seat. "Hold on, hold on!"

Buffy shifted Anya's elbow from her gut and looked frantically out the rear-view mirror to see an Army Jeep loaded with demons gaining on them. Xander accelerated and turned the wheel hard and suddenly they were cornering lopsidedly with squeals of rubber, everyone bracing as they were thrown left and right, but god, it was like the damn car was standing still, and Buffy's chest was sticky with breaths she couldn't quite get out.

A gunshot thunked against metal, and another and another.

"Get down!" she cried over the back seat, terror swamping her as headlights brightened through the dusty glass of the rear window, backing the shadowy curve of Dawn's skull. Willow palmed Dawn's head and they slid down the seats as Buffy pulled Anya close, moments before the back window exploded, followed a split-second later by the front. In Buffy's arms, Anya squirmed and gasped like a fish, but Buffy held tight. "Don't, Anya, don't," she said, dislodging a mouthful of permed hair to get the words out.

"I can't see!" yelled Xander with a note of panic. The front safety window hung in a mosaic of fractured glass, and Buffy leaned forward and punched repeatedly until with a ripping sound the window loosened from its frame and skidded across the hood to disappear.

Another turn, one set of wheels jouncing them over a curb, Xander cursing. Buffy tried to look everywhere at once, ahead and behind. They were speeding crazily along, cool wind rushing in and whipping their hair around. "Oh my god," she said, tensing, rabbit-eyed. "Is that--"

"Roadblock." Xander sounded terribly calm, the kind of calm you might cultivate when you're trying not to hurl, and there was no way they could logically be aiming themselves at the Jeeps parked nose to nose across the road, but they were getting nearer and nearer, just like in the movies.

"Crevi, uh, uh--diremi!" A boom filled the car like a suddenly cranked stereo as a bolt of magic whooshed past Buffy's head through the broken window. The Jeeps in front of them were flung apart to land topsy-turvy on their metal asses. Crashing metal outside mixed with a strange smell in the car of singed hair and sulfur. Her ears rang. "Sorry, sorry," Willow chanted breathlessly, but the wind whirled her apology away and Buffy braced her hand on the dash and they sped through the wreckage.

Colorfully lit strip malls flashed past them on either side of a widening road. She rarely visited this outlying land of fabric stores and garden centers and sales lots of shiny trucks. This far from the center of town, no soldiers were in sight, but a few cars passed them going in the wrongest possible direction. Others clustered in the parking lot around an open doughnut shop, and Buffy glimpsed a blur of people sitting at the counter with their coffees before they were left behind.

"Are they still chasing us?" Dawn began to peep over the seat, then gave an unhappy ow as she brushed against a cascade of glass on the upholstery.

"They're gone," Buffy said, checking behind them to confirm the empty road. She loosened her armful of Anya and faced into the sharp wind, squinting as they flew into a tunnel of trees dotted with trailers and small, half-hidden houses. "Does this take us out of town?"

Xander had become a one-track-mind driver again. "Yeah. A few miles and we can cut over to Route 1."
"It's weird that they just...let us go," said Tara dubiously.

Buffy had no response to that, but the rushing wind erased her silence along with everyone else's. The road ahead, that was what she needed to focus on now. They'd get to L.A., bring back Angel and import Giles, make a plan. Then they'd come back, fight the fight.

No matter that with the wind in her face, it felt like running.

They'd given him the works: a Jeep, an aide, a driver, and a map marked with strategic points of deployment. Take a tour of the town, they'd said; lend a hand where needed. Sending him off, Liyoge had clapped him on the shoulder: "What do humans say--get your feet wet?"

Spike squinted at the map he was holding, tracing his way from point to point with one gloved finger. The uncovered Jeep rolled through the empty streets and a cold breeze kissed his face, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd been so favored by the Powers That Be. Usually he found himself paddling through a river of shit toward steep falls.

This was a hoot.

"We're operating on a 'Five Rings' strategic targeting model," the aide said, leaning forward at Spike's shoulder to be heard. "We've had to adapt it a bit. Leadership first, then local military and infrastructure. General population control is the next level of attainment."

"Uh huh," Spike said indifferently, not looking up from his map. "Dandy."

"We accomplished all our first-strike target goals within eight hours," the aide wittered. "Building on months of penetrative infiltration and intelligence, of course."

"Penetrative," Spike echoed absently, looking up from the map to orient himself. "Sounds like good clean fun."

"Well, I'm sure...I wasn't involved at that stage. I just arrived. Came up through the gate with the first wave of forces."

Spike turned his head. "The gate?"

"The portal."

"Portal."

"From down under," the aide said helpfully.

"Australia?" Spike asked, brows knitting in bemusement.

The aide was staring at him as if he couldn't quite accept Spike's ignorance. "Grauth. The thirty-third dimension of the Plentiful Elder Hells. Our Imperial State. Grauth."

"Course. How could I forget? Lovely place. Vacationed there last summer. Sun and surf, charming native girls, abundant...pineapples."
"Actually, sir, Grauth has been closed to interdimensional travel for over fifty years." The aide sounded cautious and apologetic. "Many of our kind have been stranded here since that time, salving their homesickness in service to the state. It is our lonely kinsmen who have helped bring about the new era of Grauth rule here on Earth."

"Quite inspiring," Spike said dismissively. "One for the history books." He peered ahead at a familiar building cordoned off and illuminated by spotlights. "What's that up there? Y.M.C.A., innit?" He'd showered and shagged there once in a while years back, before he'd rigged piping to his crypt and nabbed himself the affections of a slayer.

"Detention station," said the driver and aide in unison.

"Don't need it in stereo, thanks. Pull over."

The Jeep drew up to the curb next and Spike swung over the door, receiving smart salutes from the demons guarding the entrance. Disconcerted--why hadn't they taught him the bloody secret hand signals?--he thumped arm to chest in a negligent mirror of protocol.

"Here to have a look-see," he ventured, masking wariness under a layer of attitude but more or less expecting the guards to chase him off. He didn't trust his authority yet, felt like he should be braced for the punchline.

"Sir!" barked the guard on the left, and pulled open the door for him.

Trying not to show any surprise, Spike straightened his shoulders. "Right...spot inspection." As he passed by the guard, he smirked to himself, savoring the sudden rush of power.

"What would you like to see, sir?" asked the aide tagging at his shoulder. "Is there anything I can get you?"

Before he could answer they turned a juncture in the corridor and an officer trotted up to join them, eagerly snapping a salute. "Sir! It's an honor to have you here. We haven't had much time, but we've accomplished a lot, I think. If there's anything I can do, anything."

Spike paused, considering him. "Do you even know who I am," he glanced at the chevrons on the man's shoulders and took a guess, "Lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant Cenebe, sir. At your service. And of course, Captain, er--" He clearly couldn't fill in the blank. "That is, I, I--" The Grauth stammered to a halt.

"Never mind."

"This is Captain Aurelius, sir," his aide said in a reproving tone.


Wandering past glowing soda and snack machines and into a lofty gymnasium, Spike didn't answer, too caught up in marveling at the scene before him. The perimeter and central aisle of the room were patrolled by armed soldiers attentively monitoring an interior campground of humans and demons, arrayed on mats and sleeping bags and mattresses. The humans huddled in pathetic, vigilant groups away from their fellow prisoners, women clutching their brats close like teddy bears, men glowering protectively over their women. The demons were rowdier, playing dice and drinking from flasks as they defiantly jeered at their captors.
As Spike paced the middle of the room surveying the organized chaos, the crowd quieted. Demons turned their heads to stare at him with recognition and baleful rage. The humans simply looked terrified. And why not? He cut a dashing figure. Cloaked in uniform black, strolling like a prince among peasants, not one of the increasingly familiar demons but something new—he was nightmare material that even their dulled human instincts couldn't write off. In moments, his boot steps were echoing on the floorboards in the silence of the room. Spike slid his arms behind his back, carrying himself in the official way of brass wankers the world over.

"Why are they here?" he asked his aide, affecting a bored, casual tone. What the hell was his name anyway? Something skittery and verminy. Roach? Mouse? Oh, yeah. Raus. "Enemies of the state?"

"No, sir. Enemies of the state are to be, er, neutralized. These are simply detainees who have failed to observe the laws of the New Grauth Reich."

"Laws," Spike repeated in a dry, inquisitive voice.

"Oh, yes, sir," said Raus earnestly. "For example, driving without a notarized Imperial license is in defiance of the Transportation Code of Indentured Citizens, section three."

"Ri-i-i-i-ight. And they know this how? You lot got here, what--ten, twelve hours ago?"

Raus gave a tight smile as he met Spike's eyes. "Ignorance of the law is no excuse, sir."

"What's going to happen to them?"

"Work camps for most," Lieutenant Cenebe offered with a degree of enthusiasm that made Spike eye him speculatively. "The more useful ones will be released with a warning, assuming that the severity of the crime is not...."

He continued talking. Distracted and not really listening, Spike stared at a woman curled with protective tenderness around her whimpering child. Common enough bint. Thirtyish; dyed hair and cheap jewelry; jumper, jeans and trainers. She was staring at him with venomous, sullen hatred as if she knew him. He didn't know her, though, and didn't think he'd killed any relatives back in the day. And it dawned on him that her hatred was simply for what he represented. He was a high-ranking toff in a fancy uniform, holding her and the rug-rat against their wills. Damn right she should hate him.

"What'd she do?" he asked, interrupting the lieutenant's drone to nod toward the woman.

Cenebe cleared his throat. "I, I don't know precisely, sir. But you can be assured the guardsmen would not have brought her here if--"

Spike stepped off the aisle and crouched near the woman. She hugged her child tighter, stiff and brimming with fear, miserably defiant. "Why are you here, love? Hmm?"

The woman's throat worked speechlessly, and then she gathered herself to reply, "I went to the store for breakfast. Cereal. These...things...stopped me. I ran."

"Smart girl," Spike said softly and approvingly. The woman stared at him, hand splayed around her child's small burrowed head, nothing on her face that he could truly comprehend. He stood. "Let her go," he said, voice loud enough to carry. "All charges dropped." Turning to Cenebe, he added: "See that she gets home safe."

"Of course, sir," said Cenebe, beckoning imperiously to a guard to escort the woman off.
Watching her and her little one be led away, Spike felt a small glow of satisfaction. Noble, that was him. An officer and a gentleman. No thanks needed; the gesture its only reward. But on the heels of that thought came a dry cynicism as he acknowledged his action for what it was: empty, symbolic, inadequate.

Oh, what the hell. Did it even bloody matter? This was the day of reckoning for most of these poor sods. Humans were about to find out that dominant species was a relative term. He'd do what he could. And what he could do...wasn't entirely clear yet. But it would be. He'd make a point of finding out. Soon. No point in having rank and privilege if you couldn't have fun with it.

Besides, he was doing this for Buffy. Everything he did, he did for her. He'd be useful to her, a man of power in the new world order. At least, he could be. If she played her cards right. If she made certain concessions. Admissions. If she stopped being such a bloody bitch.

"So what's next, then?" he asked, turning to his escorts. "Say--they still got jacuzzis in this place?"

"We should be nearing the edge of town," said Xander, peering through the car's gutted front window. "I think the sky's getting lighter."

Buffy eyed the road ahead. There was certainly something in the air, a kind of diffused glow sifting through the trees. Next to her, Anya sat facing straight forward, profile resolutely defining whatever private thoughts she held, arms wrapped around herself to stave off the chill. The wind smelted of pine. Everyone in the car was quiet, but the tension gathered as they turned a curve in the road.

"That must be the sign," said Buffy, spotting a roadside board ahead of them, vividly white in the lifting dusk. "City limits."

"What is that?" asked Anya, unpeeling one hand from herself to point.

"It's daylight," Willow said, leaning forward over the seat, her head near Buffy's.

It took a slightly longer moment for Buffy's eyes to understand what they were seeing, and then it clarified with a snap, like a picture on a TV screen growing larger, a square of sunshiny color surrounded by darkness. "I think maybe we should slow down," she said carefully, and then her eyes widened a moment later as she recalculated velocity and distance. "Xander! Stop the car!" She twisted against the seat, bracing herself and throwing one arm across Anya. Xander hit the brakes and the car skidded with a screech of rubber toward the sunlight and crashed into it.

The world around them flared into a brilliant, electric shade of blue that shoved them back into their seats and sent the car bouncing back several yards, then slowly ebbed.

"What the hell was that?" Xander gasped.

Buffy touched her forehead, but it was reflex; she was looking for an injury that wasn't there. They should have been thrown forward from the car, but they'd been thrown back. The hood was up, obscuring their view. She opened the car door and got out, walking up to the barrier. The brilliant light had faded and the air was clear again; nothing showed where the town ended and the outside
world began except a line dividing light from darkness. But when she touched her fingers to the empty air, blue waves of magical energy rippled out. The harder she pushed, the brighter the glow, and the stronger the answering pressure against her hand. She leaned into the wall with slayer force, but it felt like iron, and when she hauled off and kicked it, it kicked back, sending her flying down the road. She landed hard on the black-top, groaning as the others cried out her name and rushed to her side.

"Was kicking it really necessary?" Dawn asked wryly, kneeling next to Buffy as she sat up. "Cause when you were doing that whole mime leaning-into-the-wind routine, it was kinda obvious we weren't getting out."

"Right," Buffy sighed, letting Dawn help her stand up. "Thanks."

"This is good news," said Tara. Everyone turned her way. "Well, sort of. I mean, we know now that the invasion is confined to Sunnydale."

They walked back to the barrier, lining up along its surface to look out. On the other side, the trees continued down the road, dappled by ordinary sunlight, and a tiny two-pump gas station was visible in a nearby clearing. Ice chest, Coke machine, pay phone. It looked like heaven and was as unreachable as the moon.

"So, Will." Xander glanced her way. "Care to do the honors and state the obvious?"

Willow touched her hand to the air. Blue circles rippled out as if a stone had been dropped into a lake. "Magical barrier."

"Can we punch a hole through it?" Buffy asked.

"I don't know." She looked over at Tara. "We can try."

She left them conferring over spells and turned away, feeling inadequate to face what lay ahead. This was big. Maybe too big for her to handle. But what if it was too big for all of them? Angel, Giles, Willow. They weren't an army; not even Riley's people could have gone up against this.

"I'm going to push the car off the road," said Xander, and Buffy nodded absently.

Murmurs and a sharp staticky sound caught her attention, and she turned again to watch Willow and Tara attacking the barrier. Gold light poured from their outstretched hands into a blue lake that was growing larger by the second.

"Buffy." It was Dawn at her shoulder, watching along with her. "What's going to happen?"

Buffy swallowed her first impulse to say, like Willow, I don't know. "We're going to get out of here, head to L.A. Round up Angel and the others. And we'll call Giles. And together we'll figure out what to do."

"No." The subdued tone of Dawn's voice made Buffy look her way. "I don't mean what's going to happen to us. We know what's going on. And we have you, and two witches. We're getting by. But what's going to happen to everyone else? To Kerry and the Martinsons and Mister Dern." Mister Dern? Oh, her English teacher. "They don't know what to do. They don't even know what demons are."

"Dawn, I don't think they're in any immediate danger." Buffy touched her arm, rubbed it with as much reassurance as she could manage. "You saw what was happening. They picked us out for a reason. We're the troublemakers. Think about it. They could have opened fire on everyone in town"
if they'd wanted to. They didn't."

"What do they want, then?"

Buffy shook her head wordlessly.

"General Nilec, sir: the mayor of Sunnydale."

The general looked up from his new desk, disgruntled. The offices of the mayor weren't nearly as grand as he'd expected. He'd been given to understand that the mayor was the ranking leader of the town. But the manacled man standing before him was as unimpressive as his puny, wood-paneled office. "You are responsible for this," Nilec said.

The mayor raised an eyebrow. "For Sunnydale? Yes, sir."

"For this," Nilec snarled in disgust, sweeping out one arm to take in the room. "This poverty of civic decor, this drab, homely excuse for a leader's headquarters. Your carpeting is too short, your drapes too long--you don't even have a fireplace."

"We could have one installed."

Nilec cut short his rant and stared coldly at the human, trying to decide if this was mockery or respect.

"We want you to be comfortable, General." The mayor reached up, manacle chains clanking, to shove his glasses a millimeter further along the slope of his nose. The gesture was a pointed one, but Nilec didn't order the chains removed yet, waiting to hear more. "As the chief representative of the City of Sunnydale, I know I speak for our entire town when I say that we recognize the supremacy of the Imperial State of Grauth." He smiled. "And the benefits of doing business."

"We are not here to do 'business'." Nilec leaned back in his chair, an ergonomic nightmare he intended to have replaced as soon as his own was delivered through the portal. The upholstery wasn't even leather. "Nor do we need your assistance."

"Of course not. But Sunnydale has never been an easy town to...manage."

"Rule."

"Or rule," the mayor went on smoothly, with a polite nod. "The make-up of our population has always presented unique challenges. There are troublesome elements, you might say."

Nilec picked up a cheap letter-opener, considered it, then began digging a thin crust of dirt out from under one manicured nail. "We are aware of that. We are aware of everything," he said meaningfully.

"Then you know that during my tenure in office I've made a point of building relationships with the disenfranchised. The indigenous peoples, as it were." He tilted his head. "May I sit?" After a pause--death or diplomacy?--Nilec nodded, and the mayor sat in one of the guest chairs. "And may I speak frankly?"
"There is perhaps a slightly greater risk of death." Nilec laced his fingers together. "That is your decision."

The mayor's eyes narrowed. "You don't need my assistance, but I could make things easier for you. Control the people--ease their fears. Smooth the way for Grauth rule. Propaganda works better when you use the right mouthpiece."

"What makes you think our mouths are insufficient?"

"People fear what they don't know. And they rebel." The mayor leaned back a bit and laced his hands almost imitatively, Nilec noticed. He sniffed. The human smelled powerfully of a synthetic cologne, its musk apparent even across the width of the desk. An attractive scent. Humans did some things well.

"Your cologne," he said. "What is it?"

"Er...it's called Galvano."

"You can arrange to have a case of this delivered?"

The mayor's smile widened. "Of course, General."

And the human was right, of course. He could be useful.

Fifteen minutes, thirty--Buffy had lost track, but it felt like forever passed by the time Willow and Tara finished their spell. The air sizzled as if a thundershower had just rolled by.

"It's no use," said Willow. Her face was pale and shiny with exertion, and she was breathless, like she'd been running for miles. "We tried to concentrate on one spot to punch a hole through the barrier, but it just soaks up our energies."

Tara was swaying a little, one hand resting on Willow's shoulder, her own shoulders slumped with tiredness. "It's strong magic," she said. "And it's not an isolate."

"An isolate?"

"A free-standing spell, one that's been crafted and cut loose. This is constantly replenishing itself, drawing on a power source somewhere."

"Somewhere deep," Willow added.

When Buffy met her gaze, Willow's eyes dropped. More guilt. More failure. But it wasn't her fault. She and Tara had done their best, and Buffy forced her disappointment down. Raking one hand through her hair and thinking, she asked, "Is there anything else we can try? Any way we can get a message to them?"

"Not now." Willow looked miserable. "We've depleted our powers. We'll need some time to recharge."
"We can't stay here while we're waiting," said Buffy. "That spell might have brought us some unwanted attention."

"The car isn't working," Xander reminded them. "It's about ten miles back into town on foot. And if anything's heading for us, there's a good chance it's taking this road."

"What's through these woods?" Buffy asked, looking into the underbrush.

"Woods. And then, after a while, we should reach some more woods."

"Hey," said Dawn, tugging Buffy's sleeve.

"We'll just have to hike, then," Buffy said firmly. "We don't have a choice if we--"

"Hey!" Dawn's voice rose in urgency. "Look!"

Heads turned to where she pointed. On the other side of the barrier a truck was coming their way, a big rig that showed no intentions of stopping at the dinky gas station.

"Oh man," Xander said, horrified. "If it hits the barrier at that speed--"

Infected with his alarm, Buffy began waving her arms at the oncoming truck. The others quickly joined in, shouting out warnings that there was little chance the driver could hear. But he had to see them.

"He has to see us," said Buffy as Dawn hopped up and down anxiously at her side, arms flailing like a demented cheerleader. "Why the hell isn't he stopping?"

Anyá clutched her hands to her chest. "I think we should--"

"--get off the road," Buffy finished.

They scrambled and broke apart like waves before the onrushing rig, and the noise of its engine and their yells merged together with the sensation of tumbling into damp shrubbery, and as Buffy whirled for one last try to hail the driver, she saw the truck slam into the barrier, its front half vanishing, followed quickly by the rest. No blue fire appeared, no boom of impact; not even a whoosh of air kicked up the dust around them--it was just a big nothing.

Xander staggered back onto the road. "There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man," he said with wigged emphasis, staring wide-eyed at the barrier.

"It's called Sunnydale," Tara said dryly.

"Where'd it go?" Dawn looked around.

"Oh!" said Willow, "The barrier--it's, it's bendy!" At Buffy's raised brow, she continued with hand gestures. "Like, time or space. Or space-time. The truck must have passed through to..." She hesitated.

"To where?"

"Well, best-case scenario? The other side of town. Worst case, I'm thinking the depths of hell."

"No," said Xander, "That's where we are, and the truck's not here."

"Xander." Buffy gave him a meaningful look, tipping her head subtly toward Dawn. "We should
probably get going. We can follow the barrier. Maybe we'll find a door or...something."

There was nothing from the car to salvage except the guns, and right now Buffy would have traded her own weapon for a breath-mint and a can of grape soda. As she took one last look at the gas station sitting peacefully in the sunlight, she found herself thinking of the doughnut shop they'd passed miles back. Cruellers and hot coffee and brightly lit warmth. In one direction was freedom, in the other lay merely the illusion of comfort, miles closer to an army of pesky demons and the radical deconstruction of her life.

"Do you think we'll really find a way out?" Dawn asked, softly enough that the others couldn't hear.

"Well, even if we don't, someone will find a way in. It won't take long for them to realize what's happened." She rested her hand on Dawn's back and began guiding her into the woods. They fell into step and disappeared into the treeline while on the other side of the barrier, in the sunlit sky, a bird flew past the gas station, past a sign from which the words "Welcome to Sunnydale" were fading. As it glided forward, for a moment its tiny bird mind sensed something, an invisible shimmer in the sunny air, and it almost flew aside. But animal momentum carried it through, and it continued down the road in the sunshine, a road suddenly bare of trees and surrounded by desert, and in its flight it noticed nothing missing. Nothing...

...and the bird lifted its wings, tipping and veering. Sunlight flared, and out of the corner of his eye, Giles saw feathers flash and then heard a sickening smack as a body hit the common room window.

"Good lord," said Quentin Travers, mildly startled enough to spare a glance from the tea he was pouring.

For a moment Giles was in shock, but the bird dropped away, and he was left looking only at its absence and a crack in the window and the dark rain-stricken sky beyond. Eyes closed, he took off his glasses and touched his temple, wincing almost as if the poor animal's pain were his own. He must be getting a migraine. He thought he'd seen a burst of sunlight just before the bird hit. And now Travers was saying something.

"...don't think I've ever seen a falcon in London."

"What?" said Giles, reassuming his glasses. "Oh. I've heard they're nesting here now. In, er, greater numbers." He frowned and tried to pin-point what he'd been doing just a minute earlier. There were papers scattered on the study table, and heavy books he couldn't remember taking from the shelves. "What were we discussing?"

Travers returned to the table and sat down with his tea. His frown matched Giles's own. "You know...I don't recall."

Sinking down in his own chair, Giles picked up a piece of paper and scanned it. The writing was a language he hadn't seen in years. "How odd. This is in Naciran."

"Naciran?" Travers pursed his lips. "Obscure language. Not much call for it these days." He sipped his tea and took on a musing expression. "Though we did have a young apprentice watcher who dabbled in Naciran. Havisham, that was."

"Havisham," Giles chuckled lightly, then caught Travers' eye. "Sorry, yes. Funny name. Well, perhaps he left his books here."
"No," Travers said in cool dismissal of the idea. "Lost his marbles a few months ago, poor chap. We had to put the fellow away."

"Amazing you didn't put him down," Giles muttered sourly to himself.

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing. It's...Sunnydale." Giles blinked at the scrap of writing paper he'd been about to tuck away in a book. An odd spasm of memory or imagination crossed his mind, blooming in the sharp crease of his brows, then vanished as suddenly.

Travers shifted in his chair with an impatient twitch of tweed. "Sunnyvale?"

"What?"

"What?" Travers lifted his brows and lowered his tea-cup.

Giles directed his eyes to the other man, bewildered. "You said 'Sunnyvale'."

"I was merely repeating you."

"I never said any such thing. Sunnyvale. Isn't that in California?" Absently, Giles continued tidying the tableful of books. Quite a mess. The young really had no sense of decorum any more.

"How would I know?" Travers seemed offended by the very idea. "I've never been to the god-forsaken place."

It was a bright, bright sunshiny day, but Cordelia felt restless and sad. She stood just inside the shade of the hotel, looking out over the courtyard where Fred's roses were blooming like crazy for the second straight year. She heard a deliberate footstep next to her. He didn't have to make a sound, so she knew he was being polite.

"What's up?" Angel asked, voice low as if he were afraid of disturbing something, when in fact it was, it was--

"A big bunch of nothing," she said rather grimly.

Angel glanced out at the flower bed. "Looks more like a big bunch of roses."

"Yeah.... They seem happy, don't they?"

"American Beauties," he said in his oblique way.

Cordelia gave him a suspicious look. "Isn't that a porn film?"

"The roses."

"Oh."

"How did you know that was a porn film?"
"How do you know it is?"

"Never mind."

"Ditto." She folded her arms across her chest and resumed staring at the flowers. "Bees buzzing, the sun shining, roses rosing."

Angel seemed to think this needed commentary. "It's a beautiful day."

"It's horrible," Cordelia burst out. Anxiety gripped her convulsively as she gave voice to what she'd been trying to ignore.

"Okay."

She turned to him. "Angel, I was up and down all night. Terrible nightmares, and headaches. It was like the way the visions used to be."

His face grew concerned. She could tell because he blinked. "What did you see?"

"It was. It was nothing. I don't remember." She heard her own wavery desperation, and tried to articulate what she felt. "Every time I woke I forgot. It just melted away. But I feel..."

"What?"

"I feel like I've lost something." Cordelia gazed into his eyes, anguished and knowing how lame she sounded. And his face was unreadable. "Something important."

"I feel that too," he said in a quiet voice. "I feel like I've lost." He paused. "Someone."

"You do?" She was startled. For a moment they stood there, each trying to remember what or who had been misplaced. "Where's Connor?"

"Classes."

"Wes and Gunn?"

"They're doing that, uh, thing with the--"

"Right. And Fred is...wait, is it Fred?" She looked over one shoulder at the roses, and felt Angel follow her glance.

"No. I mean, I miss her, but...no."

The vagueness of her own mind made Cordelia impatient with his. "Well, what then? Argh." She gripped her hair with both hands, then smoothed it out again, regretting the dramatics and the damage to her curls. "This is so crazy. I feel like I left the water running and--"

"And the oceans are rising."

"Yes! That's exactly it."

"You know what's really weird?" Angel struck a broody sort of pose, gazing at his boots as if he were ashamed, then raising his head to meet her eyes.

"So very much is weird, Angel, that I'm hoping you'll answer that question yourself."
"I keep thinking of Spike."

"Oh my god. You mean that bleached death's head with the pimp-a-riffic taste in jewelry? Why the hell are you thinking about him?"

"I don't know. I just...wonder where he is."

"Who cares?"

"Right," said Angel, as if trying to talk himself around to this way of thinking. He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Of course. Except. Why do I keep thinking about him?" His inquiry was plaintive, pathetic.

"Tell me he's not the one you're missing." Cordelia folded her arms again and cocked one hip with affected disdain, ready to snap him back to reality.

"God, no. No! But. Sort of."

"Well," said Cordelia brightly, showing teeth and ignoring his obvious, squirming embarrassment. "I think it's time for me to be one of the ladies who lunch. I'll just be down the street at Quizno's, drowning my horror in lemonade if you need me." With a smart swivel of her heel, she began to walk inside.

"Cordy." When she looked back, Angel was still staring out into the roses, shoulders set, a black figure outlined against the near blinding sun. "Where did we meet?"

"Say again?"

"Where did we meet?"

"We met here in L.A., silly. At a party." She shook her head in disbelief and left him standing there.

"Right," Angel said to himself as her clicking footsteps retreated. "A party."

Festive, thought Spike, looking out over the crowds of demons they were driving past. In this part of town the humans were dead or evacuated or hiding, while outside on their abandoned lawns the inheritors of the earth were building bonfires and setting off fireworks. Grills dotted the curbs where opportunistic demons sold hotdogs, and music boomed from dozens of stolen stereos. There was dancing in the streets. A bit premature, that.

"Disco is undead," he said, grimacing in faint disgust as he watched two vamps boogie down, their platform heels stepping expertly around a fallen corpse. "Also happens to be the first five letters of 'discordant'," he realized thoughtfully.

Raus leaned forward. "Pardon, sir?"

Spike shook his head in silence and lit a cigarette, cupping the lighter flame against the wind until it caught. Smoke streamed away behind him as the Jeep veered around revelers and cut down a
familiar street. "Here," he said, sitting up straighter. "Pull up at that house; one with all the bloody looters tearin' up the lawn." Outrage was rising in him like a red tide, washing away any sense of irony. "Ought to be illegal."

"Actually, it is, sir."

He glanced at Raus, the blade of his anger sharpening on sudden pleasure. "That so? Glad to hear it."

Spike leaped from the Jeep before it completely stopped, sailing feet-first into the crowd of demons pawing through the clothes and furniture that lay strewn across the Summers lawn. By the time his boots landed in the grass, his face had changed. Snarling, he wrenched the neck of the nearest demon until it cracked, while its oblivious companions were still busy playing with a lacy tablecloth. Back-up! he heard Raus shout from the curb. Back-up? Who needed back-up? Not him.

Most of the demons were Hellions, and that made for a fun fight, especially after they took notice of him. He took down three on his first sweep of the yard, but in the middle of the melee he noticed more demons running from the house with slayer souvenirs in hand. "Sneaking little thieves!" he bellowed. "Punks! Come back here and fight like de--oof!" He went down under a weighty body and rolled on top of it. It was a bad-ass vamp the size of a Buick, and damn, he wasn't packing a stake. He thumped his joined fists down on the bastard's smirking face and then pulled out his gun, shoved it fangward and fired. It made a satisfying noise and the vamp gurgled around a mouthful of blood. Didn't finish him off, but he'd be feeling unwell for a while.

Spike rose. Fancying his new weapon, he took aim at a Dryac running his way and fired again, smacking a pair of bullets neatly into its forehead. It dropped and didn't move. The rush of success heated his blood. Lifting the pistol and tilting his grip sideways, he squinted and swept his arm like a deliberate clock-hand across the yard and shot until the clip was empty, hitting most of what he aimed at. Howls of pain filled the night, only to disappear under the loud chop of approaching helicopter blades and a hail of automatic weaponry.

This must be back-up. He had to admit it was useful. When the copter finished its job and flew off, Buffy's front lawn was silent and littered with motionless bodies. Raus came out from where he'd been hiding and joined Spike.

"A stunning victory, sir."

"Give it a rest." Spike devamped and tucked his gun away. He could look unflinchingly on the carnage, but like the girl he'd eaten earlier, the aftermath didn't taste as sweet as the action. It was a shame you couldn't--

He flinched and threw his arm up as a burst of light filled his eyes. "Hey! What the--"

"Photograph, sir," said some newty git in a shabby grey trench. He held up a heavy camera the likes of which Spike hadn't seen in half a century. "The troops need to see this sort of thing. Good for their morale. 'Officer Braves Rebel Nest: Slays 11'." The flash popped again, painting strobes across Spike's eyeballs.

"I count twelve," Raus corrected, jotting in a notebook.

"Rebel nest?" Spike repeated dryly. "Oh, that's rich."

"Do you have all you need?" Raus asked the photographer, tucking his notes back into his pocket.

"Name?"
"Captain Aurelius, William Aurelius--two l's in 'William', one in 'Aurelius'. My office will get a full report to you in time for deadline."

Left alone on the lawn with his aide, Spike looked him over with new, more cynical attention, eyes still burning in their sockets from the camera's harsh flash. "Interesting job you have there."

"It has many facets." Raus's teeth gleamed when he smiled.

"And this is the facet where you paint my exploits all shiny and hero-like?" Spike gave a derisive laugh, trying not to show how disturbing the thought was. "Good luck, mate."

"You cut a dashing figure, sir."

"Bugger off." Scowling, Spike made his way across the lawn and entered Buffy's house. Inside was as much as mess as out. The closet and basement doors stood open and everything tucked away had been dragged loose. Short shirts and shiny pants trailed down the stairs like a stripper's walk, and one strappy sandal dangled from the foyer ceiling lamp. He bent and picked up a stuffed animal, a pig he recognized as Buffy's. "Christ," he said, more shaken than he cared to admit.

Picking his way into the living room, his boots crunched on broken glass and knocked aside the knick-knacks Joyce had collected and left to her daughters. Ripped, overturned chairs blocked entry into the rear of the house, but it didn't matter. He didn't need to see more. This room was bad enough, trashed and mocked, its familiar walls painted with ketchup and yogurt and canned cheese. And other things much worse. He turned away, unwelcome tears of anger in his eyes, to find Raus lurking behind him.

"A shame," said his aide. "I believe this house was allotted to one of General Nilec's staff. He won't be pleased."

"Don't really care," Spike said coldly and softly. "And you don't need to either. Only thing you need to care about is that I'm not pleased."

Raus cleared his throat and shifted nervously. "Wh-what can I do, sir?"

"Clean this mess up. And get me some boxes."

As his aide scurried off, Spike noticed he was still holding the pig. He raised it an inch or two for a closer look, and brushed back one ear with a thumb, his thoughts elsewhere. Signs of violence all around but he didn't even know if she'd been witness to the damage or where she was now. But she had to be safe, because...because.

"I'll take care of the homefront, Slayer. You just look after yourself." He paused and sighed. "I'm talking to your sodding stuffed pig, you know. Can't say I don't love you." He thought of their last fight, and knew that the rage he'd felt still simmered somewhere down inside him. Rage at her, he could, and then turn that rage to good use on her behalf. "We fight, you mock me, I go off to join the Army," he said wryly. "Grand old story, innit, never out of date. Hearts full of passion, jealousy, and hate--" He broke off self-consciously as he realized Raus was standing next to him, holding a box and taking in the scene with wide eyes. "Do you mind?" Spike drawled in defensive aggression. "Private conversation."

"Of course, sir." Raus paused. "Sir?"

"What!"

Raus lowered his voice to a whisper: "Is it an enchanted pig?"
"Are we there yet?" Dawn joked darkly.

Buffy, busy keeping her footing on the uneven ground, didn't answer. The forest around them had thinned, but it was still night and despite trying to keep themselves close to the barrier, she felt like they'd drifted off course.

"We've lost our way," said Anya. "I'm sure of it."

Xander tramped noisily through a drift of leaves. "That's only because we don't know where we are."

"Your inane humor has successfully distracted me from our dire predicament," Anya responded in a tart voice. "Thank you, Xander."

"You're welcome. And may I say that your sarcasm lends much to my own experience."

"Shut up, both of you!" snapped Buffy, who was hungry and thirsty and intensely irritated.

"I think I see a light ahead." The relief in Tara's voice hit Buffy in a place that needed aspirin, and her own feeling of relief was immediate.

"I see it too," Willow said hesitantly, looking up through the trees.

"What's that noise?" Dawn asked. "It sounds like--"

"Helicopters." Xander unslung his gun. "Time to dash."

Buffy sprang ahead, unsure where she was leading them, but determined to be first for target practice. She could hear the line of their feet crashing through the brush, and the cut of chopper blades growing louder above their heads. When spotlights began zig-zagging across the ground she danced sideways to avoid them and checked over her shoulder to make sure everyone else was keeping up.

"This way," she yelled. Which way? she thought, and then tripped and fell like Alice down the rabbit hole, and that was almost a nightmare that Anya might have, wasn't it, down the rabbit hole, and either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for Buffy had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next.

To Be Continued
Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I've been depressed. Not sure I'm out of the woods yet. But I finished this. That's something, anyway. I haven't even re-read it to see if it's up to standards. Whatever. It feels more like therapy that story-telling right now.

I was thinking about why I'd originally called this a two-parter; not sure it works that way structurally anymore; and given how soap-opera-like canon itself is, the very notion of two-parters seems quaint. But they're good for one thing: you don't have to think up another title. So I'm leaving it as is.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
Previously on Buffy....

"This way," Buffy yelled. *Which way?* she thought, and then tripped and fell like Alice down the rabbit hole, and that was almost a nightmare that Anya might have, wasn't it, down the rabbit hole, and either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for Buffy had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next.
Willow was absently rubbing the grunge of one palm against her jeans. "Funny how Sunnydale drains are always conveniently human-sized."

"Let's have a round of applause for our beloved and very former Mayor Wilkins," said Xander. Buffy and the others looked his way in surprise. "When you contract for enough underground parking garages, you get to see a lot of the original blueprints. The man's name is on everything. Richard Wilkins, Richard Wilkins Junior, Richard Wilkins the Third. He had influence in making sure the water and sewer systems were built to spec. And that spec was demon-friendly."

"I don't care if this was built by Genghis Khan as long as it helps us get into town unnoticed." Buffy stepped back inside.

"Why does everyone always think Genghis was such a bad guy?" asked Anya, following along with the others. Her next words echoed against the pipe walls. "I never received a single petition for vengeance against him, despite the many hundreds of women he used and enslaved. He was a considerate lover, for a Mongol...or so I've heard." She glanced at Xander.

"Splende," said Willow, and with a twitch of fingers conjured a glowing ball that hung in the air a moment before rolling gently forward, lighting their way. The drain ahead was a featureless grey tube with only a few stains and striations along the sides; at their feet ran a thin stream of water.

Their group fell into single file, the better to navigate the curved pipe bed, and Buffy moved to take the lead, feeling more claustrophobic the deeper they went. On the side of optimism, floods were rare in Sunnydale. On the side of pessimism, she was all too easily imagining scary things and dead ends, or dead things and scary ends, not to mention the possibility of the pipe growing narrower and swallowing them up like a big snake.

"Are there any rats down here?" Dawn wondered.

"Probably depends on how recently it rained," Willow answered. "Don't worry, Dawnie. Any rats we see I'll send packing back to Ratville."

Dawn looked back over one shoulder. "Isn't this Ratville?"

"Well, uh...okay, I'll send them to a rat-friendly dimension."

"What if they're ex-minions of Amy?" Xander wondered.

Willow's voice got testier: "Then they'll be right at home."

Buffy tuned out her friends' chatter and let Willow's little glowy ball guide her path. The further into the pipe she went the chillier and danker it got. There were no turn-offs and no deviations—it was a pipe, not a tunnel—and she hoped she hadn't made a bad move by directing them this way. Playing follow-the-leader was less fun when you were always the one leading. Especially when the stakes of the game were so high.

Stakes made her think of the wooden kind, which led to vampires, which led to a subject of preoccupation she'd somehow managed to avoid until now: Spike. Where was he? Hiding out, maybe. Or not even up yet. She imagined him sprawled out in his crypt, one arm flung over his face, blood and whiskey heavy on his non-existent breath as he lay motionless; a muscular log, sleeping away a day without daylight. Big oblivious vampire creep.

Buffy's wandering attention was caught by something on the side of the pipe, and she paused to take it in.
"Hey, what is that?" asked Willow, behind her.

"I don't know--some kind of graffiti." A large black 'S' was sprayed on the north wall. Buffy moved slowly forward, reading. "S...P...I. Oh my god." With growing dismay, she jogged until she could read the entire thing.

"Spike Loves Diu," Xander said in incomprehension, as they clumped together at the end of this dedication. "What is that, French?"

"Dieu--that's 'God.' Spike loves God?" Dawn sounded dubious. "I don't think he's really a big fan. Plus, he spelled it wrong." She ended on a lofty, superior note.

"I think that's supposed to be 'Dru,'" Tara noted dryly, brushing some caked mud off the 'r' with her fingertips.


Dawn shifted a little closer to Buffy. "Where do you think Spike is? Do you think maybe he got out of town?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Willow drawled, her voice as cool as the air around them.

Buffy turned her head a little at the remark, but forced herself not to meet Willow's eyes; not to see whatever was in them. This was the wrong time and place for a fight. She looked back at the inscription her thoughts had conjured. "Well, at least we know one thing--this pipe is going to lead us somewhere."

But if it led them to Spike, she might be inclined to punch him in the face. Just for old time's sake.

It reminded him of the night Buffy came back from the grave.

A nip in the air now; the hijinks on a grander scale, but the motive for celebration wasn't much different than it had been back then. Liberty for the monsters to wander. Joy of chaos. Hell, no one needed more motive than that. The excitement was its own reason, a force building like a storm. The party was spilling across town, street by street, house by house. Spike could smell blood and fire on the wind. The scents made him heady, filled him with longing and a sense of youth. Set his fangs itching.

His Jeep rolled down Main Street at a sedate pace, though. Stately pace, you might say. On either side, demons rampaged unchecked, breaking store windows, spraying piss or paint on the walls to mark their newly claimed territory. Die Humans! shouted a red scrawl across the front of a bank. Hyuman = verminn read another. Like Kristallnacht but with worse spelling, thought Spike, watching two Fyarl heave themselves bodily through a sheet of plate glass, either in pursuit of women's fancy dresswear or just for the sheer bloody hell of it.

With distance and the dignity of his uniform between them, Spike could almost convince himself he was above this lot, a rabble little better than animals. But in some part of himself, he felt the call of like to like. He was demon, after all. Only a twist of fate drove him to kill his own kind. He
couldn't make a meal of death now, but he could serve it. And maybe it wasn't so unnatural. People move up the food chain, and those too slow or stupid to adapt got left behind. Taking them out was a kind of mercy, looked at like that. Saved them from their own pathetic existences.

A Preggothian lifted a trashcan and sent it sailing through a display window of a little coffee shop where Spike had occasionally tossed back an espresso or five. "Troops will be here soon," said Raus, his unshakable shadow. He sounded on the verge of a disapproving sniff. "Destruction of property can't be avoided, but the cost of rebuilding falls to us. They don't think of that."

"Daresay they don't," Spike agreed indifferently.

"They demolish perfectly good buildings and we foot the bill."

"Dashed shame." Moodily Spike scanned the street, wondering what he was supposed to do with himself. Drive around in an endless maze like one of those little Pac-Men thingies, gorging up demons? He'd gotten the hang of his mission quick enough, and was already feeling restless, even a bit bored, if truth be told. Just then he noticed a crew of uglies advancing on the Magic Box. He swiveled his head sharply as they drove past, and ordered the driver to make a sharp u-turn. "I'm going to save the Reich the cost of some reconstruction, mate," he told Raus as the Jeep veered. "That work for you?"

"Of course, sir."

And why was he going out of his way? Not just boredom: Anya'd never let him hear the end of it if he didn't save her little shop of horrors--screech like an owl on fire, she would, if he let them trash the place.

"Where are those brilliant brass whatsits of yours?" he asked Raus, snapping fingers impatiently at his aide. "C'mon. Look sharp there, Gollum." The Grauth scrabbled around in the back seat, then handed over the Reich's sigil just as they pulled up alongside the demons, whose crowbars and bats signified they'd come to play hard. Spike hopped out onto the sidewalk.

"It's the Slayer's pet vamp," sneered the chief big ugly, sketching a frown up and down Spike's uniform. "You dressed up for Halloween, Spike? Little late for that."

"Every day's a holiday--if you got the right attitude." He offered the kind of smile that smart folks were reluctant to accept, then went over and slapped the sigil onto the front door of the Magic Box. The force of his blow drove its sharp little prongs into the wood. "Pay heed to this sign. Anywhere it hangs is off limits to you lot. Spread the word. Anyone trespasses here, they answer to the New Grauth Reich in terrible, painful ways. So slag off now and get your jollies elsewhere."

The lead demon stepped closer. "You change sides like a weather-cock, vampire. Every which way the wind blows."

"Least I know where to blow and when."


Spike's face sharpened in an unfriendly way, but his eyes gleamed. Hell, he could appreciate a joke. Sometimes he was even still laughing when he gutted the clever bugger. "That's right," he said, tapping two fingers against a strip of ribbons. "Captain now. Serving the Imperial Grauth Army. Might want to remember that." He hollowed his cheeks, lips curling into a smirk. "Could mean the difference between life and--oh, hell, you have no options." And he struck a blow faster
than the eye could blink, snarling in pleasure as the nearest demon went down.

They hadn't reached the end of the pipe, but after what might have been miles they did find a gaping hole blown in its roof, from which a rusty ladder descended. Buffy climbed up first, a beat behind the bouncing witchlight, then dusted her hands off while looking around. "Well, this is not so eerily familiar," she said as the others emerged from the hole. The hollow bonging of shoes on metal mixed with the clatter of guns, the sounds echoing in the large room.

Xander looked around. "The factory. You know, I vowed never to step foot in this place again, but it's giving me this warm, weird feeling. Almost like nostalgia." He paused contemplatively as he circled his hand just in front of his stomach. "No...no, that's not quite it. More like feverish nausea."

"So this is where Spike used to live before he was encrypted?" Dawn frowned. "What a dump."

"Doesn't look like anyone's been housekeeping in a while," Willow observed, moving through the debris of fire, age, and vandalism and pausing by a table laid for a dinner party of the damned. Buffy mirrored her steps, noticing the dust on the broken plates, the overturned tapers, the cobwebs lacing the chair-backs. Empty wine bottles. Blood spatters on the white tablecloth. And, oh, a nice centerpiece, made of--well, something dry and shriveled she really didn't want to identify. She could almost feel ghosts brushing the back of her neck as they passed; hear the brittle clink of goblets raised in toast, accompanied by laughter. Too familiar laughter; casual, vicious, mad.

"Good," she said, turning away. "We'll set up camp here."

"Here?" Willow repeated doubtfully.

"For tonight, anyway."

Xander stood with one hand on the strap of his gun, his restlessness obvious. "I'll do a perimeter check."

Buffy watched him walk off, feeling as tense as he sounded. She suspected she'd be hearing the words 'perimeter check' a lot more often now, and that it wouldn't take her long to grow sick of them. Never mind. Time to make job assignments. Keep yourself busy, she'd learned, and you could nearly stop thinking about what might happen next. Keep everyone around you busy, and you didn't have to talk about it either.

"If we're bedding down, we'll need something to sleep on--there's a lot of fire damage, but the other rooms might have something. Dawn, Anya, can you check, see if there's anything not entirely ratty or nesty that we can use?" They nodded and moved away arm in arm while she turned to Willow and Tara. "We're going to need food too, and we can't make any plans until we get a lay of the land. When Xander gets back, I'm going to head into town. I'd feel better if one of you came along, but someone has to stay here with Dawn." And Anya. "I mean, you know--a magicky someone."

Tara's eyes flicked sideways, then back to Buffy. "I'll stay."

"Thanks."
Having set the work to motion, Buffy wandered through the room, stroking a dangling chain as she passed, setting it swinging; straightening an overturned chair. Above, Xander's steps clanged on a catwalk. Following Buffy's movements with her eyes, Willow measured her friend's degree of worry by slope of her shoulders, and thought about what remained unsaid between them.

"We need to tell her," Tara said quietly, reading her thoughts in a way that needed no spell. To Willow's ears she might as well have said: you need to tell her.

Willow pressed her lips together briefly, then forced herself to relax. She gusted out a soft little breath. "Soon."

"Very soon."

Her tone drew Willow's gaze around. "Some things aren't easy to tell," she said, trying not to let anger rise as far as her throat.

"The longer you wait, the harder it is."

If you charged for platitudes, I'd be bankrupt by now, Willow thought ungraciously. "I know," she said aloud, watching Buffy pick up a book and set it back down into a puff of dust. "I really know."

"Smells like teen spirit," Dawn said, nose wrinkling in disgust as she sniffed the blanket. "After the body died." She dropped the material and trailed her hand along the baseboard of the bed. Wrapping a hand around one of the posts, she swung lightly from it, but the wood creaked alarmingly and she forced herself to stop.

Anyah was folding sheets while trying to touch them only with her nails. She wasn't doing a very good job and looked grumpy. "I don't know why she wants us to sleep here. We could all hide out at our apartment. Xander's not important--no one will look for us there. And it's much nicer. We have an air-popper and comfy pillows. *Clean* pillows." She aggressively whacked dust from the one she'd been plumping and sneezed several times, looking even more peevish when she finished. The lit candles flickered in the draft.

Dawn knelt down before a trunk and tested its lock. "Yeah, except the soldiers have seen us now. That officer guy, anyway."

"I'm sure we all look alike to them. Pale, bipedal, badly dressed." She cut a glance at Dawn. "The rest of you, I mean."

The trunk opened easily. Inside were about a hundred dolls, all mangled and headless. Dawn picked a disembodied head up and turned it around a moment, before chucking it back inside with a grimace. "Jeepers," she muttered, feeling shivery. They had to be Drusilla's. Spike's old girlfriend. Dawn had worked hard to make herself forget Dru, and didn't like being reminded. In the flash of a moment, she was reeled back to that night she'd been hurrying home from Janice's, and how the crazy lady in the white dress had beckoned, drawing her helplessly into the bushes for one blind, terrible minute before Buffy had rescued her. She'd had nightmares for weeks, of long fingernails and a moonlit smile. And those eyes.
"I've had it up to here," Anya muttered, making some finger-waving gesture Dawn didn't quite catch. She only paid half attention. Anya was prone to rants. "Hiding while these kresk'neth take over the town and steal our hard-earned money--"

"What's a 'kresk'neth'?'" She pronounced the word with care.

"--property damage is already unimaginable--"

Dawn tilted her head, thinking back to forbidden books she shouldn't have read. "Doesn't it mean 'ditch-pig'?"

"--and I was nearly a member of the City Council--"

Out of the corner of her eye, Dawn could see Anya pacing; she picked up another doll and stroked its silken dress. The doll's white porcelain arms were stretched out as if frozen in the moment before twirling.

"--so when you stop to think about it, it's really my civic duty."

The last word tore Dawn's alerted attention away from the toy trunk. "What's your duty?" she asked warily.

Anya was rubbing her hands like a nervous cricket. "The store! Weren't you listening? I need to get into town." With sudden impatient movement she knelt next to Dawn and seized one of her wrists. Her eyes were intense and the candle light made a halo of her hair. "I can't just lay down and sleep like some fluffy lamb in a slaughterhouse, not with all these clumsy Nazis wannabes rampaging through Sunnydale."

"Nazis?" Dawn squeaked.

"Crack a history book, little girl." Anya gave her wrist an irritable shake.

Dawn wrested her wrist away; it already felt bruised by the other woman's tiny pinchy fingers. "I'm not a child. If you made any sense maybe I'd understand you. Then again," she infused her voice snarkiness, "that's asking a lot."

"I'm leaving," Anya said.

Now it was Dawn's turn to grab Anya's wrist. "You can't go," she said, a bark of astonished laughter escaping her. Seeing Anya's determination, her voice rose more urgently in warning. "You just said. There's soldiers out there! Remember? With the guns and the shooting? They'll kill you."

Anya shifted closer, bones twisting out of Dawn's grip; and then her strong warm hands were covering Dawn's own. She smelled of floral soap and had the impassioned, irresistible gaze of an Avon lady. "For a thousand years I've walked this earth. Well, teleported mostly, which saves on travel time. But do you know what I have to show for all those centuries? One human male and a retail shop. And I don't even own Xander." She made this sound like an unfortunate error she hadn't fixed yet. "Sunnydale is the Slayer's. Or, now, maybe some demon army's. And sometimes I think Xander is too. Hers. The army's. I don't know. But he's not mine--not all mine. The shop is. That's my world. My oyster."

"But it's just things. Stuff. You can always get more stuff." Dawn couldn't understand it at all. Except, she kinda sorta did, and ambivalence made her voice waver weakly. Her assertion was reduced to imploring.
"It's not just stuff. It's what I do." Anya spoke with certainty. "What you do is who you are, and this is what I am. Bricks and shelves and a cash register. Ka-ching!"

"No! You're not. You're..." Dawn almost drew a blank, then out popped one of those cheesy things that made people feel better: "You're magic."

Anya stared at her for a long moment, flinty eyes softening and lips trembling as if she might cry, then said, "I'd prefer not to be holding your hands right now."

"Okay," Dawn said immediately. With relief, she rose to her feet along with Anya. "I'd ask to come with you, but you'd just tell me no." She gave a sudden smile of complicity. "So I'll cover your back while you get away."

After Anya had snuck out, Dawn staggered back into the main room under a burden of blankets and pillows. Tara came to help her. Willow was clearing space on the table. Buffy was sitting on a crate and staring off into space, like a queen bee among drones.

"Where's Anya?" her sister asked, blinking awake to notice Dawn's arrival with supplies.

Over the years, Dawn had refined the art of lying, picking up beginner's tips at school and rising to advanced placement with coaching from Spike. She glanced up casually before returning her attention to the blankets. "Going through some old boxes. Dru's stuff. Dresses, dolls. She wants to thrift them up for resale. I think she'll be a while." Calculated pause, then she grouched in a ten year old's voice: "I'm hungry. My stomach feels all squished up like a balloon animal."

Buffy, the good sister, stood on cue. "We're off to forage as soon as Xander's back."

"Xander's back," said Xander, walking up. "Except for some broken windows, a missing door, and a dozen unguarded bolt-holes, this place is completely secure."

"We'll only be gone a little while." Buffy swept a look Dawn's and Tara's way. "Anyone comes, you do two things: run and hide. Nothing else."

"Mind if I breathe and blink?" Dawn muttered at the bedding.

"Don't worry," said Tara. "And be careful." Somehow the most ordinary words gained intensity in her mouth, like lines in a serious play, and Dawn felt her gut tighten as she looked up to watch the others leave. Like always, it could be the last time she ever saw them. An impulse kicked in briefly to run after her sister and give her a hug, but it passed. You couldn't be afraid all the time. It would drain you like a battery.

Tara came over and sat down next to her in a rustle of skirts. Dawn sometimes felt as if Tara was the only one who really saw her, but she wasn't seeing her now. She looked like she had a stomach ache in her entire body, and her attention was absent. "You okay?" Dawn asked, latching onto the opportunity to be solicitous to someone. Needed.

"Not really." She gave a rueful smile, and her eyes finally focused on Dawn. "What about you?"

She reached out, laying her wrist on Dawn's knee, taking her hand.
It was enough to make Dawn want to curl up and cry. "I-I keep thinking about everyone from school. My teachers. And Kerry." Anxiety she'd tried to control all day was bubbling up inside. "The Hellmouth is so...I'm so over it."

"Me too, sweetie."

"Isn't there a way to put a lid on it?"

Tara looked as if she was thinking seriously about the question, which made Dawn feel not so stupid for asking. "Well, in theory it's already closed. But the energy seeps out. The entire area is a nexus of negative ley lines, and that allows other portals to be opened." Tara caught her eye and read her confusion. "Energy flows here. Like water flowing downhill. And even if we could build a dam, it would still rain. Some of it's even good energy, some neutral. Mostly it's evil. But it's all natural. Part of the balance of the world."

"Great. So we hold prime real estate on the flood plains of hell."

"We'll get through this," Tara said. Her long hair swung as she leaned forward and pressed her forehead gently to Dawn's for a moment. Dawn, watching their hair tangle at the tips, smiled a little. Warmth grew where they touched, and remained after Tara pulled away.

Like driftwood on waves, one through rose in Dawn's mind even as another fell. "Anya said..." She hesitated. "She said that these demons, they're Nazis. Or like Nazis."

Tara's face became harder to read. "Oh?" she said, rather sharply. "How does she know?"

"I'm not sure. The uniforms, maybe?"

"We don't know what they are yet, Dawn, or what they want. Making assumptions can be dangerous. For all of us."

Dawn raised her brows dubiously. "Well, they did try to kill us."

Tara's shoulders slumped a little and her face shifted again, into the shape of pain. "I know they did. I...know."

And this pain was new and different, Dawn realized, looking at Tara's downturned face. Bigger and sadder than anything she'd seen there before. Not like the world was ending.

Like it already had.

The club was thumping with music, strobing and flickering with white light. Beams cut through darkness and illegal smoke and plucked puzzle pieces from the chaos of dancing bodies on the floor of the Bronze. Demons and vampires waved their arms in the air, dancing indiscriminately with each other and passing victims through the crowd into the growing mosh pit by the stage.

On the spiral risers of the stairs, a pair of polished boots rose step by step above the throng. Bodies shifted, giving a glimpse of white gold under a cap. Light dazzling off wrist braid. Gloved hand lifting a cigarette.
The lyrics broke, and far above the gyrating bodies the boots left the stairs and strode slowly toward the edge of the grilled catwalk. If anyone had looked to heaven with their dying glance, they would have seen black gloves cutting the air like wings and a cloak thrown open, its dark flare revealing the iron-sharp crease of trousers, the silver glint of a belt buckle.

Cigarette smoke swirling, a slow tilt of chin, an inhalation that sharpened cheekbones.

Cold blue eyes surfaced under the ascent of lashes and measured the scene. Spike drew the cigarette from his mouth and added his exhalations to the haze hanging over the dancers. He squinted, bemused by the celebration, and after a moment shook his head and flicked the fag-end disdainfully into the melee. The bodies below writhed with oblivious abandon, fragmenting choppyly in the electric light.

A fledgling vamp, all girlish curves and skimpy leather, came up smiling and offered him a drink from a tray. He took the blood-filled martini glass, feeling disgruntled and not bothering to hide it. Glaring at the stylish glass, he took a grudging sip. Fast becoming a right poof. Raus stepped up next to him, arms laced behind his back, and peered out over the railing. Grauth soldiers had been stationed at the doors like bouncers, but no one dancing noticed or cared.

"Quite a showing," said Raus. "We expected only a thirty percent return on our invitations. I'd say this is--" He paused, assessing the floor. "--more like seventy."

Spike paused in the act of lifting the glass back to his mouth. "You sent invitations?" He was reluctantly impressed by the inventiveness.

"To some of the more exotic and hostile locals. We called it an 'inauguration party'."


Raus's head twitched, gaze moving past Spike's shoulder. "Ah, General Nilec."

Spike turned first his head, then his entire body to greet the new arrival. Should he salute, he wondered, decided yes after a look at the fellow's face, and executed a passable thump to the chest.

"Captain Aurelius." Nilec looked him up and down while stray electricity strobed off the dance floor, striking like knife blades across his grey skin and uniform. "Well met."

"Ditto." A pause lingered, and Spike stared into the other man's yellow eyes with interest before drawling a careful, "Sir." That'd need work.

Nilec turned away and looked out over the railing, face tightening into a subdermal sneer, like a rock star presented with a cheap buffet. "Dregs," he said.

"In a word," Spike conceded amiably. He watched Nilec sidelong, rather than the floor below. "What's the program then? Bit of ethnic cleansing to kick off the new regime?" He tried to keep his voice light, but the angles of his face threatened to harden and reveal his private dislike. Not a full day had gone by yet and already he wondered when he'd balk. Not if. When.

"Later, perhaps," Nilec said, as if declining a drink. Serious as a corpse he was, too. "Their numbers could stand to be thinned. Our rough census places the indigenous demon population of the Hellmouth at eleven thousand."

That earned a skeptical double-take. "Yeah. Pull the other one...sir."

"Quite true. The dimensional interstices of this town are crammed with them. Like roaches between
the walls." Now there was an image. "Some few will be assimilated into the Grauth elect. Others, deported." Deported? "And some," he smiled unpleasantly, "will further the progress of our noble research."

Spike didn't have time to react before Nilec raised his hand in a signal. From the shadows of each entrance melted a figure in hooded robes, and Spike's gaze traced from door to door in quick succession, a path set on fire a moment later as bolts of energy flew around the room and cut off all escape. Half the room was still voguing, unaware they'd become trapped, while those closer to the walls began to mill and shout. A line of vampires who'd been feeding from a girl on the bar top broke off and lifted their heads as one to see what was happening. Compelled by his own view, Spike watched as the strobes playing across the increasingly agitated crowds flared with new intensity, amped by the warlocky types into spidery fingers of lightning that stretched out across the club floor.

Screams rose in pitch and bodies began to fall, zapped like beetles in a bug light. Some of the harder breeds struggled toward the doors, only to be shot flat by Grauth soldiers. In a few short minutes, the floor of the Bronze was carpeted with fallen bodies giving off wisps of smoke. No one stood behind the gaudily lit bar. The victim sprawled on its surface remained unmoving, a row of shot glasses arrayed along the curve of one hip.

"They look crisped," Spike noted coolly, swallowing down an inappropriate and disturbingly human sense of outrage. He fought an urge to toss his new confederate over the rail. Grauth uber alles.

Spike uber alles, if it came to that.

"Just a little electro-shock," said Nilec. "The majority will survive."

"For your experiments."

"Yes." Nilec considered him with unblinking eyes. "You're not shocked--are you, Captain?"

"Me? Right." Spike made a show of lighting a cigarette. "Your white coats'll have a hard act to follow. Heard of the Initiative, haven't you? What installed this chip?" He saluted the side of his own head with two fingers and the smoldering cigarette. "I've been through the wars once, along with a lot of others in this town. Humans are worse than any demon when they put their minds to it. Crueler." He diverted the venom of memory into his final word.

"I have heard of the Initiative. Some might suspect that your ordeal at their hands would make you sympathetic to--" Nilec waved a hand; below, soldiers were dragging away bodies. "--the plight of lab rats."

"Don't think the Animal Liberation Front includes demons in its bleeding-heart manifesto. And I'm not a member. Sir."

"I'm pleased to hear it." Nilec gave a thin smile. "We have quite a prize here, Raus." He didn't sound enthused.

"Yes, sir."

"He'll go far."

"Indeed, sir."

"You'll be attending the real inaugural ball, I hope, Captain."
Spike inclined his head a half inch. "Wouldn't miss it."

"Excellent. Be alert for the invitation."

"Ever vigilant, sir," Spike said softly, eyes narrowing as Nilec strode away.

The sign read "Richard Wilkins III Memorial High School" and fronted a neatly mowed lawn that looked as if no human foot had ever trod its blades. It edged up to a concrete walk that outlined the school building itself.

Shadows grew to looming proportions along the rough brick wall, drawn there by the spotlights on the breezeway. Buffy looked cautiously back over one shoulder, then ahead again. Xander suspected she was feeling as highly visible as he was. He trailed behind her with Willow, no one talking until they reached the institutional-green entrance doors, its handles secured by a short chain and padlock. After making another quick scan of the premises, Buffy reared back to kick.

"Wait," Willow whispered. "I can magic it."

Buffy paused a moment, staring at her friend as she considered, every thought written on her face: it would be quieter and safer to do it Will's way, but she wouldn't concede this. "No," she said, confirming Xander's impression. "Don't waste it." She resumed her high kick, smashing the lock apart with one blow and creasing the metal that held the doors closed. One bounced open as if it feared the boot. And well it should. "Behold the magic of Kenneth Cole."

"Deja vu me," Xander said with a shake of his head, unhappily eyeballing the doors and the dim hallway beyond. "First the factory, now high school...can my next flashback be Pizza Hut?"

As they entered, Willow threw a small look of pique Buffy's way, but was ignored. And Xander tended to side with Buffy on this one--why spill magic when you could open a door the normal way, with fashionable violence? Slayer fu versus witch fu was never a fun argument, though, and he very deliberately said nothing.

"It looks just like the old Sunnydale High," Willow said, gradually abandoning her miffed stance to marvel at the lockers and the school dance banners strung above them. Her face opened, eyes and smile widening with nostalgia, and in the forgiving darkness Xander's eye was tricked as she lost seven rough years to become a girl again. They might have been sophomores breaking into school to meet with Giles, back when he was a librarian, and Xander a virgin, and the world this small.

Xander caught hold of his ranging thoughts and nodded. "Built on the same plan." The fun house was sucking him in--he had to remind himself that he knew the floor plans not as anecdote, but because his company had contracted for the job; because he was a wage-earner and an adult now, not a sixteen-year old loser; not an innocent who walked home after dark without looking over his shoulder, and not the terrified kid who'd learned about vampires when his oldest buddy became one. He'd grown up. He'd become the guy who built high schools that kids wanted to escape, schools named after evil mayors.

He was The Man.
"I feel like I left my math book in my locker," Willow said a trifle anxiously as they reached an intersection in the halls. "Like I have a test tomorrow and I haven't studied."

"Yeah." Xander knew exactly what she meant. It was all flooding back, as if there was some eternal hall monitor around the corner who'd pull them into class and never let them out again. He could tell himself he was an adult all he wanted, but he didn't feel like one. He didn't feel too old or too big for school. It still fit him fine. This was where the world tilted. Vampires and pop quizzes; gym class and demons with the faces of people; after-school study sessions and unruly boners and Willow and the deaths of friends; terror and boredom blurring together until he was at perfect equilibrium and perhaps clinically insane, until the nightmares in daylight were hard to tell apart from the ones at night, when the egg cracked open and its contents burrowed into his head. And then he'd wake up, unsure which was more real--even turning on the lamp didn't help and so he'd call Willow in the middle of the night, calls that ended with them both murmuring off into sleep, and he'd still have the phone clutched in his hand when his alarm buzzed at seven.

"Cafeteria should be this way," said Buffy.

Xander took a deep breath. "Contemplate the irony a moment," he observed, holding his hands pointedly to mark the pause, and drawing their looks. "We're breaking into a high school. To steal cafeteria food."

Buffy's brows twitched up. "It sort of invalidates all our evolutionary progress, doesn't it?"

"And every natural law of god and man."

"But don't you miss the fishsticks--oooh!" Willow interrupted herself, adding a hop to her step. "Maybe they'll have those little ice cream sandwiches!"

"You just got way too excited, Will." Xander clasped her shoulder affectionately.

His other hand rested on the strap of his semi-automatic.

From within the girl's bathroom, an unseen eye watched through a crack in the door as the strangers passed down the hallway. They seemed human. Looked human. Two of them were carrying guns, but none of them were dressed like soldiers.

Which might make them even more dangerous.

It was so hard not to get angry at Buffy sometimes. Not letting her magic the door--what was that all about? But being back in high school again, even if wasn't really theirs, made Willow forget her grudge. How could she hold a grudge, anyway, when she still held so many secrets in
reserve? She knew the moment was going to come when she had to tell Buffy about the visions, and it made her sick to her stomach. Better not to think about it yet.

She filled a crate with half-pints of milk, enough only for one meal, because they wouldn't keep; and put apples on top of them. And hey--

"Little boxes of cereal," she said, holding up a box to show Xander, who was packing another crate with tubs of yogurt and trays of sticky buns. "I love these, 'cause you can pour the milk in." He smiled absently and went right back to work, and for some reason she found herself thinking about the UCS dining hall, wondering if she'd ever eat there again; sit with Tara in their favorite sunny spot, books spread out, sharing a sandwich.

"I miss school," she said wistfully. Deep down, she really missed normal.

"That's because you're special. Right now, kids all over Sunnydale are deeply grateful that the demon invasion has spared them from having to turn in their book reports on Monday."

He sounded so cynical, she thought, and it was so familiar; as if he'd just been waiting for a new disaster to spend his wit on. And then Buffy walked up and plunked two full crates down on the counter, fingers twined casually through the mesh, and Willow flashed on Sigourney Weaver in *Aliens*, strapped into the walking forklift. She felt admiring and slightly jealous, and there they were: Xander, Buffy, and her inescapable self, three stars in a constellation that could, even after all these years, realign into the pattern they'd held when they first met--a trio of secretive rebels on the wrong side of the cafeteria line.

Geeks with guns.

Camaraderie could be an opportunity. She glanced at Buffy speculatively from under her lashes, said, "I think we should stop by the Magic Box before we bring back the food. There are some books I need. We shouldn't leave them there."

"The shop's right on Main Street, Will. Too close to the action."

"We could take the tunnels."

Xander looked up from his crate, objectively interested. "Do you know the way in from this side of town?"

"No, but--"

"No buts," said Buffy. "It's too dangerous right now."

Willow bent her head rather grimly, and thought about the book she'd hidden in the basement, and weighed the odds of the shop being torched despite all its protective spells and wards, and okay, was that a sound?

"Did anyone hear that?" asked Xander.

"Foreboding offscreen noise? Check." Buffy moved toward the side entrance, stopped as she remembered to unsling her gun, then poked the tip forcefully at the door to set it swinging. A thump and a yelp sounded from the other side, followed by a huge crash. Buffy dashed through the door, Xander and Willow on her heels.

In the cafeteria, a figure lay sprawled across a hill of fallen food-trays, and another was racing for the far doors.
"Stop!" Buffy yelled with full cheerleader authority, and the runner stopped on a dime, one leg and both arms raised in the air, a precarious stork-like position that lasted about three wavering seconds before toppling. The body submerged within a sea of tables and groaned feebly.

"It's just kids," Willow said, as Xander hauled up a teenager from the mess of clattering trays. Buffy collected the other one and guided her over. The boy was black, the girl white, and both wore matching track suits. The girl had pigtails and horn-rimmed glasses and a rubber choker; the boy had spirals shaved into his hair above his ears. They looked freaked out.

"What are you doing here?" Buffy shoved her gun back over her shoulder and faced off with them confrontationally.

"Saturday morning," Xander said knowingly. "Detention." No one contradicted him, not even to point out it was late afternoon. The clocks kept ticking, but darkness arrested time.

Willow exchanged a look with Buffy. "Are you the only ones here?" The kids were silent. "It's okay. We're not...uh, bad guys."

"There's four of us," the boy finally said. "Rest went home, except for--" He hesitated. "Teacher never even came."

"Why didn't you go?" Even as Xander asked the question, Willow could imagine the answers. Why not stay? It was better than home, it was exciting, and the streets were dangerous.

"Lewis," the girl said, and her breath hitched once.

"Some damn ugly thing tore him apart on the lawn." The boy tried to scowl bravely, but his eyes were unnerved. "Pieces all over."

"It drank right out of his--" The girl faltered, staring at a private viewscreen of memory. "Head," she finished in a whisper, and then her eyes rolled back in her own head and she went down in a heap on the chipped linoleum.

"Oh boy," Willow said.

They'd found a deck of cards with naked ladies on them, and Dawn had watched Tara's face twitch between appalled fascination and nervous indecision. She'd finally given in and let Dawn deal a hand of Go Fish.

"Give me all your queens," Dawn commanded.

Tara drew out a card, looked at it, and winced. "I don't think--are, are you sure?"

"Hand it over." Reluctantly, Tara passed her the card. Dawn glanced at it. "Huh. The queen of diamonds is holding her scepter in a really strange...oh." She lowered her eyebrows and tucked the card away carefully. "That was disturbing. My tender mind is way scarred."

"Really?" Tara seemed ready to take that claim all too seriously.
"Um, no." She grinned a little. "They didn't have online porn when you were growing up, did they?"

"Oh...oh, no. But we made our own fun. Also, we had farm animals." Tara paused and looked up from her cards. "Those two thoughts were in no way related."

Dawn giggled, and then footsteps from the hall made their heads turn. "God. Food. I hope you guys got--Kerry!" Squealing, she hopped up and threw herself at her friend, who squeezed her back, more tightly and more affectionately than she ever had before. She smelled of patchouli, and felt bony and small in Dawn's arms.

"Hey, sibs."

Dawn pulled back. "What are you doing here?"

"Your armed and dangerous sis broke into our school, bogarted some food and kidnapped us. Oh, and on the way back she killed this one guy with a tongue depressor. Very Nikita," Kerry summarized approvingly. "Hon, I did not cred your vampires. But once you see the dust fly, you gotta believe."

The others had set food crates on the charred table, and Dawn finally realized there were other kids too, bad kids, the kind Kerry hung with by natural selection and Dawn by association. And standing beside them was La Femme Buffy, wearing an expression of forced cheer Dawn hadn't seen in a while, like a kindergarten teacher about to launch a sing-along. Despite Kerry's endorsement, Dawn felt the cold, gut-level chill of impending social mortification.

"This is Jason, Marcos, and Dor," Buffy announced a bit too loudly, pointing to each one in turn as she made the introductions. Dawn cringed. "And Kerry. They'll be staying with us overnight." Buffy passed a meaningful look around. "While we camp out here." And then her gaze rolled off to one side, as if she'd done her part in maintaining a facade of cheerful normality. Cross that off the list. Next task. Immediately she frowned. "Where's Anya?"

"She's been in the other room for--for quite a while." Tara's tone changed mid-sentence from casual to worried. "I should go check on her."

"I'll go," said Xander.

"No...wait." Dawn's shoulders hunched. "She's not there. She went into town. She wanted to make sure the store was okay."

"And you let her go?" Buffy folded her arms. "And then lied." Her voice flattened condemningly with that statement.

Dawn cocked a hip and folded her own arms, driven to posturing in front of her peers. "You did not see her. She was all Anya of Arc. Her eyes were glowing." But she stole a guilty glance at Xander, whose eyes burned through her with nearly as much ferocity. The whole mussed-hair, mouth-breathing, motionless NRA posture he held was far spookier than Buffy's familiar anger. He was deeply pissed.

Only Buffy was vocal, though. "That's just great, Dawn." She turned away dismissively, focusing on Xander. "Let me grab some food and I'll go get her."

"Count me in. She's my batty girlfriend." His jaw twitched, and he looked as if he wanted to say more, but wasn't letting himself.
"I'm going too," Willow added quietly. "We need stuff. The kind I can't put on a shopping list."

"Does anyone else hear music?" Tara wondered.

"I found a hand." Heads turned. Jason was holding an open jewelry box with a twirling ballerina, from which tinkled 'Some Day My Prince Will Come.' He kept staring fixedly inside. "Yo, why you all got a hand in here? It's like...mummified."

"Oh my god," Dor said, looking over his shoulder and then fainting.

"Don't worry about her." Kerry lit a cigarette nonchalantly as everyone else stood frozen in momentary surprise. "Dumb bitch takes too much crank."

The alley behind the Magic Box was dark. Everywhere was dark. End-of-the-world-dark, Anya supposed. Except what if it wasn't? If the world went on, someone would eventually have to go shopping. And someone else, namely shop-keepers like her, would have to make sure the stores opened on time. But who would bring supplies to restock the stores, now that they were trapped in a bubble of Sunnydale? If the trucks passed right through with their eggs, and herbs, and shoes? That was the question. She wondered if she could get her herbs and orbs teleported in. It would add to the per-item cost, and mark-ups would naturally follow. What would happen when people ran out of money, though--when no more money was coming into the banks? It didn't bear thinking about.

Anya stiffened as something banged further down the alley, like a garbage can lid falling to the ground. "Who's there?" she called, clutching her scavenged piece of two-by-four in both hands and raising it. Guns weren't for her, but she wished she'd taken one. "I'll shoot if I have to," she called. But nothing answered and she made it inside the shop safely, and flicked on the lights.

She'd expected to see chaos, debris, the ruins of her livelihood, but the shop was as tidy as when she'd left it, which gladdened her heart. "Good, it's all good," she murmured to herself as she checked the undisturbed cash drawer and assessed her stock. Was it too late to open? Did time matter any more? She glanced at her watch dubiously, then shrugged and went to open up. Flipped the sign from 'Closed' to 'Open', peered out, then opened the door. The bell jangled in the quiet night, and she stood there a moment in the frame, anxiously staring up and down the street.

"We're open!" she announced loudly, then frowned. Maybe that wasn't such a good idea. She turned to go back inside and noticed something hanging on her door, a fierce brass bird on a shield, wings outspread. "Hey," she complained. "Who put this here?" Whirling angrily, hands on hips, she surveyed the street again. "Who put this on my shop?" The lack of response made her even more irritable, and she tried to pry the sign off, but it wouldn't come loose.

Muttering, she went back inside to find a hammer, but just when she'd found it, the entrance bell rang. She turned and went still; the hammer was in her grasp but she didn't dare raise it. "Hello," she said, nervous but drawing on a face of cheer. "How can I help you today?"

Two of the uniformed demons walked around slowly, taking in the contents of the shelves and the display tables. The third, who wore little glasses, stepped forward, looking uncomfortable. "Good evening, ma'am," he said. "You are a herbalist, ka?"
"Ka!" she said, smiling brightly. "Yes. We have many herbs."

"I have an itch," the demon said, edging nearer as if afraid his companions would hear. "A nether itch."

"Oh, I should have something for that." She went and collected a little baggie of ground yugguth root from one of the apothecary jars and brought it to the counter. The demon met her there to hand over payment. Sort of.

"These are sticks," Anya observed aloud. She held them up. Yes, sticks. Two of them, small, with colored beads. "These aren't money. Do you have any mo-ney?" She sounded out the last word slowly, then added, "Dollars?" She held up the green stuff as an example, and the demon hesitated, then handed over another stick. They had to be new to this plane of existence, Anya decided. Foreigners with their funny money. A bank would never convert this.

"This isn't money, either. This is another stick." She tried to remain polite and helpful. He did have a gun, after all.

The demon stared at her. "That is Imperial Grauth tender. Your sign indicates you are licensed to sell."

"Oh." Anya put the pieces together. "Of course. No problem. I'm sure they'll have a currency exchange set up very soon." She rang up the sale and tucked the sticks in her drawer. They fit quite well in the check slot. "I can't make change. Is--is that all right?"

"Ka. Fine." He took the bag and stuck it in his pocket. "I am Arnje. You have a boyfriend?" A sudden frisky glimmer lit his eyes, a look she'd only seen ten thousand times before, usually right before she zapped the guy with a curse. You could dim men's ardor with painful boils, but rarely anything short of that. They were stupid that way.


"I will be back. When my itch clears up, I will thank you." The demon returned to the others, who were hulking patiently by the door.

Anya wasn't particularly interested in thanks other than money, but on the other hand....

"Thank you for visiting the Magic Box," she called after them. "Please tell your friends about us! Ten percent off this week for all invading forces." And why not? Buffy might get angry, and Xander too, but practicality never hurt.

Time to make a sale sign, Anya decided.

"The first twenty-four hours are critical, sir. We have to subdue as much of the populace as we can and convince the locals that resistance to our rule is pointless. Announcing our victory is premature, but the humans won't know that. They'll believe what they see on TV. Of course, if we'd been able to introduce our sedatives into the water--oh, well." As he spoke, Raus unlatched
the straps on the leather carrying-case and pulled out a flask, a capped cocktail shaker, and a short glass, setting them one by one on the brick wall running around the roof.

Captain Aurelius watched this process silently. He might not have wanted a drink, but the sheer gratuitous luxury of having his personal aide make one for him had to be entrancing. Raus had served four officers in his career, and each assignment had been a figurehead, a straw man. He was practiced at seducing them into a decadent lifestyle, distracting them from paying too much attention to their nominal duties and whatever circumstances might eventually befall them. And a vampire--such a creature would be infinitely more susceptible than any Grauth. Little better than animals, they were. All fang and fight, no subtlety. And the captain had not disappointed so far, proving ready to make the extravagant and violent gestures that would win over the ranks.

He had flair, Raus had to admit.

Brilliant white light from the street backlit the liquor accessories, and cast the dazzling glow and long shadows of a Hollywood premier across the gritty surfaces of the roof-top. It bleached the captain's face to the bone and stripped him of any softness, highlighting the blades of his cheeks and gilding the dark lashes which lay half-lowered across his eyes. Raus thought his glance went unnoticed, but the captain's head suddenly turned and tilted his way, gaze fixing on his with too much intelligence. An unexpected shiver went through Raus.

"Blood and whiskey, sir." He held out the shaken cocktail, and the captain took it in one black gloved hand with great deliberateness, holding his eyes all the while. A faint murmur rose from below. "The speeches should be starting soon," Raus said, clearing his throat.

"And we care why?" asked the captain. His voice was dry and cynical, and while Raus himself was also cynical, it just wasn't right coming from a vampire. He bristled but held his tongue, and after a moment the captain sighed and moved toward the edge. Raus flanked him, arms laced behind his back, and peered down into the street. A podium faced rows of metal chairs, around which were situated TV cameras to capture various photogenic angles. The chairs were filled with soldiers restlessly chatting, while on stage behind the podium sat a row of officers, passing congratulatory smiles back and forth. A long banner bearing the Imperial seal hung down the front of a majestic marble building. Bank, Raus thought.

"The speeches will be beamed live to all television and radio stations." He couldn't keep the admiration for the technology from his voice. "It's very exciting. To finally be here, to experience your TV first hand." The captain shot him an incredulous look. "We've seen so many old shows and films, but the quality is poor. My first purchase will be a VCR. I would like to see Citizen Kane again. I think it will be even better with dialogue."

The captain made a sound Raus classified somewhere between derision and amusement, but the conversation went no further. Below, General Nilec stepped up to the podium. As he raised his arms, silence descended.

"Soldiers and citizens of the Imperial State of Grauth! Over fifty years have passed since the gates of our realm were closed to Earth and the greatest spiritual reformation that Grauth has ever known began to take shape. This is a momentous day for our people, the day that we have returned to seize that which destiny has promised us. Today the New Grauth Reich is born!"

Raus, seized by the moment, cheered vigorously along with the crowd below. Captain Aurelius remained unmoved beside him.

"Great are the tasks before us, if we are to maintain the conquest that our brave soldiers have begun...."
Buffy pushed up the trapdoor in the shop cellar and climbed out onto the dusty floor. Xander and Willow followed as she goat-footed it up the stairs, but she stopped at the door hesitantly before opening it, unsure what she'd see. The shop was quiet, though, no carnage or breakage immediately apparent; the lights on, the front door closed.

As she stepped out into the shop, Anya appeared several feet away, walking towards the front entrance with her back to Buffy, oblivious to her presence. "Anya," she said, halting the other woman as her hand came to rest on the door handle.

"Oh," she said, turning. "Hello." Guilt was audible in her voice, but not a lot of it.

"Hello," Xander shot back, making the one word an accusation.

"I know you're probably angry," Anya began.

"Angry? Why would I be angry? Just because you snuck out on us and came back to town right in the middle of a hellborn invasion so you could count your money? No, not angry. Of course, I am going to tie you up and drag you back through the sewers by your hair. I know that's very Ricky Ricardo of me, but I think I can live with the rep."

For a moment, Buffy wondered if she should speak up on behalf of girl power and Anya's right to behave like an idiot. But on second thought, no. Willow was unsupportively mute as well. In fact--Buffy glanced behind her in surprise--Willow wasn't there. But when she started back into the cellar, Willow appeared in the doorway, smiling crookedly and holding a book.

"...can't just take off, An," Xander was saying. He'd met her halfway across the shop floor and was looming. "You might try to think of other people once in a while. Our puny existences may not always penetrate that bubble around your head, but we are all in this together."

"Xander," Buffy finally said, hoping to curb his anger.

"In this together?" Anya snapped back, tone escalating. "Do you pay rent on this shop? Do you come in to open even when you're sniffly and your throat's sore?"

"Oh. My. God." Xander's hands chopped the air like axes, scant inches from her body. "Is it always about money with you? People are dying, Anya. The world is being ripped apart!"

"It's not money!" she burst out with uncharacteristic fury. "It's not money, it's not money, it's not money!" She shoved him in the chest and he staggered back a step, looking shocked. Buffy and Willow stood at a distance with eyebrows raised, and remained carefully silent. "It's about survival, Xander. Everything is. It's why we ran, why we hid. It's why I came back. This is how I can help. This is what I do."

"Help how?" Xander stared at her.

"I don't know. But I know I'm not good for anything else. I'm not going to carry a gun, and I'm not a witch or a slayer...or even a demon any more."
The line of Xander's shoulders softened, and he took her arms in his hands. "It's not all about fighting. You're not useless, An. There's plenty you can do. You're putting yourself in danger for no reason."

"I'm not in any danger. I'm licensed to operate under Grauth rule. There's a bird on my door."

Xander's hands dropped away. "Right."

"Look," she said, and walked over to open the door. Somewhere close, a cheer roared to life and then fell away again, replaced by the metallic, staccato sounds of someone speaking into a microphone. Buffy couldn't make the words out. She exchanged a frown with Willow and they crossed the shop on Xander's heels.

They gathered as a group outside the front door, and for a minute they could only stare. Here was the carnage the magic shop had somehow escaped: bodies lying twisted and motionless in the gutters, windows shattered, graffiti scrawled violently across bricks. On the other side of the street an overturned car burned, the blackened remains of a body visible inside.

"Oh my god," said Willow, her breath hitching. Buffy couldn't speak even to give comfort; her own throat had closed up at the sight. As they stood there, another crescendo of cheers rose.

"What is that?" Xander asked, hushed by the terribleness of it all.

Buffy forced herself to speak, her legs to move. "Let's find out."

"...and I would like to introduce to you now the Mayor of Sunnydale, David Garvey." There was a clatter of polite applause for the human being ushered to the podium. Buffy edged closer, into the fringes of the crowd, the others staying close. At her shoulder, Xander darted nervous glances in every direction. Buffy's attention was focused on the stage; she'd already realized the crowd wasn't entirely demon. Humans with badges clapped and cheered along with everyone else. Immersion in their fervor nauseated Buffy, but no one seemed to find them out of place or even notice their guns.

"Thank you, General Nilec." Garvey adjusted his glasses and smiled out over the crowd as if he were addressing a meeting of the PTA. He paused several moments to let the crowd settle, and energy crackled between microphone and speakers in the silence before he continued. "Citizens of Grauth. Citizens of Sunnydale. We have heard the general's rousing call to action. Today has witnessed a difficult conception, and I won't lie to you--our growing pains aren't over. Together we struggle to birth a new Sunnydale, a city united under the Imperial Reich.

"In upcoming days, I will address Sunnydale citizens directly. I have accepted a new role in this new state, and a welcome one. I thank General Nilec for this opportunity, and look forward to working with our friends from below. They've come to usher us into an age of cooperation and peace between humans and Grauth--a community of prosperity and culture. I hope you'll let me guide you as we adjust to the strange but, I think, exciting changes ahead. Watch and listen for these broadcasts--they'll be carried at the top of every hour.

"For now, I ask that all Sunnydale residents remain in their homes. Municipal employees whose positions are designated critical-need will be contacted soon. If you are given instructions by a
Grauth official, please follow them. Thank you." Garvey stepped back and took a seat on the stage, shaking hands with one of the generals on the way.

"Collaborating bastard," Xander said, and spat to one side. His words had been quiet enough to go unheard by anyone outside their circle, but the bitterness of his gesture jerked Buffy from the daze left by Garvey's speech. She didn't know what to do next.

And then she did.

"Come on," she said. Where she led, they followed.

Spike had taken up a lounging position on the parapet, leaning against a bit of decorative brickwork, one knee drawn up, cigarette lit and flask handy. It gave a good view of the action. He held a secret appreciation for pomp and circumstance. He'd watched Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee procession from the overlook of a well-curtained window; Charles and Diana's wedding on the telly of a London hotel room (Dru had dressed her dolls in white; herself worn nothing at all). Compared to the extravagance of the royals, though, this dog-and-pony show wasn't what you'd call rousing. Dull as watching worms race across a coffin lid, actually.

He looked away from the scene below. "Tch. How often d'you invade the earth?" he asked Raus with rhetorical irritation. "Two, three times in your life at most? Reich can't be hurting for money now--why not splurge on the festivities? Victory parade and fanfare, naked virgins on horseback tossing garlands. Elephants and cannon fire and twisty little dancing girls, all decked out in bells from toes to tits. That's what this town needs, mate." Surfacing from glittery images, he cemented his advice by pointing at Raus, cigarette twigged between two fingers.

"Yes, sir. It's time, sir."

The man had his attention. Spike tensed slightly, preparing to move fast in whatever direction circumstances dictated. "Time?" Soldiers appeared from the shadows and saluted Spike with respectful force. Still wary, Spike rose and returned the gesture. After another squint at Raus, he accompanied them in silence off the roof and down the narrow stairs.

Buffy wound her way up the narrow stairs until she reached the door to the roof, which she slammed open with further help from Mister Cole. The pebbled roof crunched under her heels, and a few stray pigeons whirred softly from some hidden eave, but these low sounds lasted only as long as a break in oration from the street below. A voice filled the mic and the crowd began clapping again as Buffy and the others walked across the roof. She glanced from side to side, seeing no one on the nearby roof-tops, then scanned the layout of stage and seating.

"What's the range on these?" she asked, raising her semi-automatic.
"At least a hundred yards." Xander gave her a concerned frown that she ignored, then glanced over his shoulder at the others. She could feel their uncertainty and restless movements without having to look.

"So, longer than from here to there," she said, estimating dubiously the distance between her position and the stage.

"Uh, yeah. That's about sixty feet. Buff, are you sure you want to do this? I'm all for hitting them hard, but there aren't many ways off this roof. And even if they have this whole area cordoned off, they've probably taken precautions against snipers."

"I feel some magical energy nearby," Willow told them. "But it could just be the force-field. We don't know how low it is." She gazed upwards, and Buffy tipped her own head back a moment, thinking she might see its glow. But the sky was clear, the stars glimmering in the black.

"This is a bad idea." Anya's tone was sharp. "Why should we all get captured?"

Xander's face tightened as he turned her way, but when he spoke his voice was gentle. "We shouldn't. You should go back to the store, An." He caught Willow up in his look. "You should both go. This is hardware, not software."

"Until their wizards start wizzing."

"What makes you think they have wizards?"

"Hello? Giant force-field." Willow's voice rose to a pissed-off pitch. "I'm not leaving, Xander."

"I am." Buffy, examining her rounds, spared Anya a look. "I'll be in the shop," the other woman went on. "No one suspects me of anything. I can hide you there, create distractions."

Not a bad plan, Buffy realized, starting to see the benefits for the first time. "You're right. We might need the shop later. It could be helpful, having a front." She clocked Xander's expression of displeasure, and knew that at some point down the line they'd have to convince him of this plan.

"A front." Anya visibly latched on to this idea, face brightening. "That's what I'll be. A front! I'll divert the enemy with my charm and wiles. I'll sabotage all the spices, bringing their spells down from the inside." Apparently eager to begin, she kissed Xander's cheeks, said "Don't get killed, honey," and went trippingly off.

Xander stared grimly after her, then turned his attention closer. "Now we'll never pry her out of there."

"Can we talk about this later? I'm about to kill things."

He rallied himself. "Want help?"

"Actually, I was hoping you'd cover--"

Even over the rising noise of the demons, Willow's gasp broke through their conversation, and they tracked her gaze to the scene below. A dark red carpet bisected the seats and heads were turning as two soldiers, guns shouldered, trailed and guided a figure toward the stage. His black cap and cloak hid his identity, and Buffy couldn't have said for sure whether he was officer or prisoner, except that prisoners probably wouldn't be dressed like that and the wave of applause from the crowd suggested welcome.
The man reached the stage and swept up the steps to clasp the hand of the demon general, and somehow Buffy had known. She'd known by the way he moved, by the glimpse of gold hair, by the certainty that her life was forever and always a cruel joke waiting to unfold. Even under the partial eclipse of his cap, she could see Spike's hooded eyes, the flat line of his lips. His cloak swirled around the black length of his uniform, and he exuded the confidence of someone who knew exactly where he belonged, on stage, on the winning side.

"I would like to introduce our newest hero of the Reich, Captain William Aurelius," said the general. "In his short tenure with us, he has already slain and captured dozens of rebels and enemies of the state--"

She backed away from the roof edge, gun lowering.

"I'm sorry, Buffy." In the blur of her peripheral vision, Willow's face hung motionless and white like an unticking clock. "I wanted to tell you."

"He's spying," Buffy said mechanically. "He's getting his foot in the door so that he can... He wouldn't just...switch sides. Not after all this time." She heard her own rigid denial, couldn't stop mouthing the words or shaking her head. "He wouldn't."

Xander, who should have had something to say, said nothing.

"I had visions of this," Willow said, her small voice cutting through the larger noise, a tiny blade that made Buffy flinch and drag herself into focus. She couldn't feel the wound yet, but knew she was bleeding. Xander's head was swiveling slowly toward Willow as he listened with the same grasping, uncomprehending expression. "Months before they invaded." Willow swallowed. "I couldn't say anything. Everything we tried to stop this, in the visions--it didn't work. It killed us all. Every time, Buffy. Horrible deaths--you, Xander, Tara, Dawn. The prophecy was always destined to come true. Darkness rising. I wanted to tell you. I--"

"You saw this," Buffy broke in. "You saw this."

Willow's voice wavered and she looked to Xander, but seemed to find nothing in his frozen face to take strength from. "I saw--I knew Spike was a traitor. That's why--"

"Why you've been such a stone-cold bitch?" Biting off the words, Buffy felt something savage coiling inside her, aching to spring free. Willow was silent.

A cheer rose from below, and as if she were underwater Buffy heard the amplified murmur of Spike's voice. She shook free of her inertia and made herself walk back to the roof's edge. But he was no longer speaking into the mic; whatever he'd said had been brief, and he was shaking the demon's hand again, wearing a shiny, tacky medal around his neck. He moved to the side of the stage, eyeing the crowd, then suddenly canted his head up toward the roof-tops. She pulled back out of sight, and took a deep breath. She flicked the safety off her gun.

Xander unexpectedly touched her, his palm warm on her shoulder-blade. "Buffy, you don't have to do this. You don't have to prove anything."

"He's in the wrong place at the wrong time," she said. "Too bad for him." Her mouth tightened in resolve. "Besides. He'll survive. They're just bullets."
Spike felt exposed and didn't like the feeling. Instinct was telling him to leave the limelight, slink back into more familiar shadows. Instinct was also telling him he desperately needed a fag, but he suspected that lighting up during Nilec's interminable spiel wouldn't cut ice with the office of protocol. Edgily, he scanned the crowd and roofs again. A minute ago he thought he'd glimpsed movement above, but it was probably just someone like him, taking in the view; or maybe one of the Grauth. They must have the area covered; be bloody stupid if they didn't. He tried not to gamble his survival on the odds of other people's stupidity, but here he was on a well-lit stage, wearing a medal with a ruby big as his fist. Might as well have painted a target on his chest.

Would this wanker ever shut up?

Nilec had segued from Spike's almost entirely invented feats of heroism, to the general greatness of the Grauth armed forces, and if there'd been any cue to leave the stage buried somewhere in there, Spike had missed it. He scowled at the general, and watched odd little polka-dots appear on his chest, dots that connected a moment later to a rattle of gunfire. Spike's eyes widened and he dove off the stage, with time enough to think, that's not very hero-like, before he landed in a heap of camera and light cables.

The stage was only a knocked-together platform of wood, and Spike could see through the slatted boards to the alley beyond, over which the Grauth banner had been draped. He started to snake his way in, then stopped with gritted teeth and indecision. He wasn't a hero and didn't give a toss for his current benefactors--but he was on camera, wasn't he? How would it look?

"Bloody hell," he muttered in disgust, sliding back out. He crouched by the stage edge and then darted forward, grabbing one of the fallen generals by his collar and dragging him to safety. "Get under there," Spike ordered aggressively, shoving him below the stage. The demon moaned as he complied, and Spike took a deep breath and sprang back across the platform, vamping with a growl as a stray bullet caught him in the shoulder, before tackling one bewildered, staggering officer to the ground behind the stage. Bullets splattered across the wood behind him, sending splinters flying. "Christ!" he barked, a little shaken despite himself.

Other officers were crouched behind the bullet-tattered banner as if it afforded protection. A few of the less wounded, guns in hand, peered out in search of targets. "Security's not exactly up to par at this concert," Spike said to the nearest, needing his own target for his monumental annoyance.

"Don't know how anyone got so close," the officer said, punctuating this with a breathless grunt of pain as he shifted. "The area was secured--the roads covered."

Spike might have mentioned the vast underground system of tunnels riddling the town, but why make it easy for them? Let them do their own legwork. "Probably local Army," he said. "Holed up before the show, bided their time." Not much he could do about that. Chip and all. And yet, jittery and roused, he ached to sink his teeth into the fight. "I'm going to scout about," he said, and ran off down the alley, energy sizzling in his veins. If he circled the building and cut under the street further down, he might be able to sneak up on the bastards.

It was no plan at all. But it was fun. And that's what really mattered.
"Buffy, we have to go." Xander tugged at her arm, voice rising with urgency, feet poised to run. Return fire was beginning to bounce off the bricks--they were cutting it close. One more second and he was going to turn his best attempt at brute force on a slayer.

She slung the gun over her shoulder and moved with him across the roof-top. Willow was at the far side, waiting on them. A bridge of shimmering green fire stretched between their roof and the next. "Don't ask," she said tersely, "just run."

Xander gauged the distance to the ground. "Oh god." He let the women go first, then swallowed fear and darted across after them, not looking down. On the other side he looked back and saw the door to the roof flung open. Soldiers poured through.

"Secate!" The bridge split and dispersed under Willow's command, and they dashed forward again, taking cover behind an array of fans just as bullets began striking around them. He fired back and didn't turn until he heard Willow's yell, and then ran across the next bridge. She cast two more, zig-zagging them out of range. They ended up huddling behind a roof shed; he kept a look out while someone whammied the door open, then descended with them into the building's interior. It smelted of damp wood and pesticide, and he had no clue where the hell they were, couldn't place the building, and then it didn't matter, because they were running out of it.

"This way," Buffy said, then turned quickly on her heel and looked around, getting her bearings. "No, wait--this way."

Xander was beginning to think Anya was right about this whole idea, and he regretted that. If he died, he'd never hear the end of it. He pictured himself hovering over a seance table, listening to her complain about his irresponsible choices.

"There's a sewer tunnel entrance around here somewhere." Buffy paused, searching the ground, kicking aside trash.

"Somewhere?" Oh, yeah. They were so dead. The echoes of raised voices bounced off the alley walls, nearing and then fading.

"I've used it before. It should be right--" She stopped at what looked to Xander like a perfectly random point. "Here." Tossing aside a piece of cardboard, she uncovered the entrance, then slid the cover off.

Xander began to move forward, then went still as the cold circle of a gun barrel touched the back of his neck. "Well," said a familiar voice. "Should have known our spunky Powerpuff trio was behind this daring assault." In disbelief, Xander turned to see Spike lowering his pistol.

"You got your chip out," he breathed, feeling his gut contract in horror even as a crazy splinter of his brain admired the stylish cut of Spike's black uniform. Damn it. He wished he could get that splinter back.

"You think? Maybe I just didn't intend to hurt that nummy neck of yours, Harris." Spike wasn't even looking at him as he spoke; was looking past him to Buffy, his face refracted by hope and doubt and what might have been anger. "Buffy," he said, lacing her name with infinite meanings.

"Captain," she said coldly.

The geometry of his face shifted into a frown. "It's not--"
Buffy was dangerously still. "Don't even try it on, Spike."

"Was it you who shot me, Slayer?" Spike's voice was taking on an edge Xander didn't like.

"Maybe you'd better stay out of my line of fire."

"Is that right, love? Maybe we'd better--"

"This way!" someone called, and Xander's head jerked quickly as he tried to locate the source. A troop of running footsteps could be heard approaching.

For a moment they were frozen in a tableau, tense and silent and unsure, then Spike abandoned the unfinished drama and said quickly, "Go."

Unfreezing, they bolted for the tunnel, Buffy dropping first, Willow climbing down, and Xander taking up the rear. He paused with his hands on the ladder rungs, halfway down the hole and looking up at the vampire, who knelt ready to cover the entrance. "You're a dead man walking, Spike. Don't come near us again." It was a promise, not a joke.

Spike studied him a moment, then suddenly grabbed the back of his neck and hauled him close, his expression leashed and fierce. "Pass this on to Buffy for me, pet." He kissed Xander on the mouth and let him go roughly.

"Freak," Xander muttered and continued his descent, shaken. It was hard to make a threatening exit when you were retreating down a ladder, kissed by a vampire your escape depended on. But you took what you could get.

Pink feathers carefully nudged around the web, leaving the spider unmolested. Dawn had found the feather duster in the bedroom, and she so didn't want to know what it had been used for, because the place had clearly never been dusted in the past five million years. She felt virtuous redistributing the dust. Especially when everyone else was just lying around like a bunch of lazy meat-sacks.

Kerry sat propped next to Marcos on one of the mattresses they'd pulled into the main room, passing a cigarette back and forth, while Jason and Dor sprawled face to face on the next one, making out like there was no tomorrow. Dawn, stealing a glance, couldn't help but notice how they'd paired off and how she'd been excluded. And it was the most natural thing in the world, wasn't it, because hey, she was the most unnatural thing in the world. She imagined a future of pathetic personal ads: Ex-key, 17, SWF, seeks cute guy to unlock her heart. No vamps or creeps, please.

Across the room, Tara sneezed several times in quick succession, tiny little sneezes, like a cat. "Bless you," Dawn said with a smile.

Tara smiled wanly back. "Dawn, why don't you leave that for now."

Oh great, now she wasn't useful at all. Dawn ditched the duster and kicked around the room restlessly, her feet taking her upstairs; the building was six stories tall, because she'd seen the
elevator numbers, and this room looked like two of those stories. On the rickety catwalks she found odds and ends: another one of Dru's headless dolls, a lace glove, a bull-whip.

"Sheesh," she said to herself. "You gotta wonder about vamps sometimes." She gave the whip an experimental snap, then noticed a door marked 'Stairs' at the end of the walkway. Time for Indy to go exploring.

The dim lamp-light didn't stretch far across the cellar, but the shadows it cast thinned the nearer one moved toward its source; the dull browns of cardboard boxes glowed brighter, stock jars reflected the lamp in miniature, and the red of a rolled carpet leaning against the wall soaked up the meager light, taking on the rich color of wine.

Anya perched on a chair, Buffy and Xander sat on the couch, and Willow stood off to one side next to the torso of a mannequin. Buffy was staring off to the other side, where Willow wasn't.

"At least no one got a look at us," Xander remarked. "For all they know, we're still lying dead in the dump."

"I think they know we're loose by now." Willow's voice was low in her throat, and she ducked her head, letting her hair obscure her face. "But they may not make the connection." No one had spoken to her since they'd escaped the roof and there was no response now. During the awkward moment followed her words, the emptiness filled itself with an acute sense of misery that made her stomach ache and drove a suffusing pressure through her head. She was going to cry--don't cry--going to cry. One tear fell, and a thousand more felt ready to burst from the stony dam of her face. Without looking at anyone, she said, "I'm sorry."

"Now's a good time to be sorry," Xander said in a hard, unforgiving voice.

A small ragged sob broke free as her face crumpled, humiliating her. Cry-baby, she thought savagely, wiping fresh tears away.

"How could you not tell us, Will? We could've at least prepared better. Not been caught off guard. We almost died. Other people have died."

"I didn't know how much knowledge was dangerous," she said, focusing on him in anguish, trying to make him understand. "I didn't know when it was coming!"

Driven to his feet by anger, he jabbed a downward finger at her. "Well, maybe we could have figured that out!"

"You would have done the same thing."

"No. I wouldn't have. No one else would have. You're a control freak with trust issues, and this is what comes of it."

Shocked, she shook her head, unable to take in his harsh words. "No--"

"You turn to magic whenever you can't face reality. Spells to change my feelings for you, erase
people's memories, make yourself stronger--"

"Oh, and you haven't done stuff?" she shot back through hot tears. "You're not even a witch, Xander, but hey, let's whip up a love spell, a little song-and-dance, what could go wrong--"

"Stop it!" Anya cried.

"Because being a witch has helped you so much," he said bitingy.

And through it all, Willow was aware of how Buffy sat quietly, letting them do her fighting for her. It made Willow angry as it always did, made her want to cast her friend open, dig free the words she kept selfishly inside, more hurtful for remaining unspoken. Rage filled her at the unfairness of it, but her lip trembled. Powerful and weak at the same time, she knew anything she did would be the wrong thing, another chisel blow in their fractured circle. It didn't stop the wanting.

"Stop fighting." Anya sounded genuinely upset. "You're friends. Don't you want to hug?" She motioned in the air with her hands as if to smush them together; but, stiff and angry, neither of them moved. Willow felt better though at Anya's show of concern; she'd expected a harangue from her, along with the others.

"It's too late to argue about this." Buffy finally stood up. "It's happened. Now we deal with it. No use crying over spilled blood, is there." She said this staring directly at Willow, as if to make sure her irony hit home. "We should get back to the factory." She flipped open the trap-door.

"I'm staying," Anya mentioned, in case anyone had forgotten. Apparently Xander had.

"Anya, please--not now."

She didn't rise to the provocation. "I can sleep here on the cot," she said matter-of-factly. "Or upstairs. There's food. Well, Pop-Tarts, anyway."

Xander wiped his hand over his mouth as if erasing things he wanted to say. "Fine. I'll stay too."

This didn't seem to bother Buffy, who wasted no time climbing into the tunnel. Willow, feeling as if someone had smashed a boot into her doll house, desperately wanted to make things up with Xander before she left, but his gleaming, dark-eyed look and the set of his jaw warned her not to push it. She hefted her bundle of spell books and left without speaking.

A breeze had sprung up, making the bullet-riddled victory banner sway with grandeur. Spike, head cocked to one side, smoked moodily and stared through it. Around him the aftermath of the attack was a controlled chaos of overturned chairs, soldiers tending one another, and plucky cameramen checking their footage. Nearby, a medic truck had backed up to the stage, where generals were receiving personal aid for their wounds. He didn't bother to mention his shoulder to anyone; he'd already dug out the bullet with a knife and tossed it, leaving only the damage to his brand-new uniform. Now that offended him. Bitch had shot him. A mix-up, of course, right farce--got to expect that, what with the uniform and context--but she might've given him the benefit of the doubt.
He had no luck with women.

"You Grauth have tough hides," he commented offhandedly to Raus. "Wouldn't have put myself out if I'd known bullets bounced off your sort." In his mind, making his words empty distraction, he played Buffy, Buffy, Buffy on an endless loop of agita and self-recrimination. The sight of her across the alley, all golden-haired and gun-toting, had made him realize he'd lost the plot. What had he meant to do, impress her with his shiny buttons? Shove rank in her face and show her he could do well without her? What a git he was.

"What?" he said sharply, skinning Raus with a glare.

"I said, not all bullets do, sir. But the longer the range, the less effective they are."

Spike tucked away that piece of information and let his attention drift to Nilec, who was yelling and striding around the site in a fit of rage, shoving anyone who happened to get in his way and berating the cameramen. "Don't suppose it plays well, getting yourself shot up during the victory speech."


"Yes. This will require damage control," Raus said in bland tones that Spike barely registered. A nameless junior officer was approaching.

The demon pulled up short and saluted him. "Your bravery in the line of fire was noted, sir," he said. "Colonel Sordicov tenders his regards."

"Who the hell's he?"

Raus leaned in discreetly. "One of the officers you ushered to safety, sir."

"Oh." Caring so little, Spike could think of nothing else to say. While his grudging mind was trying to think up a gracious reply, Junior said:

"He'd like to invite you to join him in the officer's club for a drink."

Officer's club. That sounded posh and advantageous, and he could pour himself into the bottle, which he knew from experience was about the only thing that would get the blonde bint off his mind. He tossed his cigarette. "Lead the way, Corporal."

"Lieutenant, sir."

"You can be a bloody general for all I care, long as you lead me to the plonk."

Lights shut off, door locked, window guard drawn, the night silence filled the shop from floor to ceiling. Xander and Anya lay inside one of the emergency sleeping bags on the floor of the gym. Bare shoulders met bare shoulders above the hem of the material as Anya's hands stroked and gripped Xander's arms like a kneading cat's. Xander, braced over her, stared into her eyes and drew in ragged breaths as he moved slowly inside her. She bit her lip and arched her neck, hair dragging at the pillow of his folded shirt, eyes falling closed as he shifted his hips.
He could make a baby for her, make it now. It might be a tragic mistake, but it could happen and
how could he stop it, he couldn't stop it. She looked as if she had no thought in her pretty head and
his head had too many. Thoughts of Buffy, thoughts of Spike, thoughts of great and miserable
wrongness, of guns and demons and his job and corpses, and he sped to outrace them and oh,
christ, oh christ--

Xander gasped and closed his eyes as he came.

"Don't stop," cried Anya in a strangled whisper. "Don't you dare stop, oh, oh, oh--" He kissed her
mouth shut and she shuddered against him, tightening around his cock. A few moments later he
detached himself carefully and rolled off to stare at the shadowed ceiling.

"You stayed with me." Her words hitched between breaths. "You stayed."

"I did, I will, I do."

She began to cry. He turned and cradled her, pressing his face to her hair and kissing the messy
strands, while she sobbed wretchedly against him with a depth of fear and hopelessness she'd never
revealed before. He let it beat against him as he stared over her head into the darkness, seeing
futures that should never happen.

It was a long trek back to the factory, made longer by silence. Buffy didn't know how to talk to
Willow; she knew her own claws would extend if she tried, and her rage would be like poison in
the wounds she inflicted. The past several months had been difficult--were their lives
ever not difficult?--but this new knowledge cast a darker shadow over them. Another rift, both
between friends and between slayer and witch. She didn't want to play slayer and witch, but
Willow did. Willow made it so. She was used to thinking of Willow as her lieutenant in the field of
battle; of her abilities as second-rank. It felt natural to think that way. And then Will kept things
from her, things that could help her fight better, smarter. It made no sense.

She didn't entirely like these thoughts, but she couldn't help them. And she suspected Willow knew
her feelings; that this was part of the problem.

They moved from tunnels to fields and back to tunnels again, weaving from the darkness below to
the darkness above, until they reached the seedy grounds of the factory. Weathered boards and
drums littered the tall grass next to gutted, abandoned cars. The wind picked up, rustling the grass
with a rattlesnake softness, brushing the hairs of her arms and loose strands into her face. She
tucked them behind her ear and breathed in a moment's heightened awareness of ordinary scent and
sound, and the desolation around her. She was finally living in the apocalypse, rather than
anticipating it.

Inside the main room of the factory, Buffy paused, taking in the scene. Tara at the table playing
solitaire, her head at a tired angle; the kids sprawled asleep on two adjoining mattresses in a
clearing among the burned furniture. Crates of food stacked on the floor. Stale piles of bedding
waiting to be used. Candles lit. The spacious room was starting to look like a cramped fall-out
shelter, and it struck her sharply--this was no longer a lair for vampires. This was her place now.
The laws of her world had been reversed.
"Hi," Tara said in a ghostly whisper, getting up to greet them. "They're all asleep, poor things. I don't think they'll want to wake up soon." Her sharp eyes moved from Buffy's face to Willow's, and she seemed to see something there that made her gentle. "Hey, sweetie."

"Hey," Willow said lifelessly.

Tara's brows knit in concern, and she looked past them to the empty doorway. "Xander's not with you?"

"He stayed in town." Buffy took off her gun and laid it on a chair. "At the shop with Anya."

"I meant to ask about Anya too...they're okay?"

Buffy nodded, glanced around again. "Where's Dawn?"

Tara gestured upwards with her eyes and the curve of one cheek.

Buffy walked out onto the roof, letting her boot soles scrape so as not to startle Dawn. But Dawn, sitting atop a defunct ventilation unit near the roof's edge, didn't move at her arrival. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and was staring steadily off the roof, poised and calm as an Indian at a campfire. Buffy rarely saw her energetic sister this still.

"Didn't I teach you to rise and greet evil vampires when they sneak up behind you?"

"I knew it was you. I can feel when it's you."

That was news to Buffy, and kind of disturbing, but she let it go, continuing to look at her sister; the fall of her loose hair, her graceful profile--a little sharper than last year's, closer to adulthood. The monks had worked magic, but hadn't got the family resemblance entirely right; she looked nothing like mom, nothing like dad. Not even like her slayer sister. She was just Dawn.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer."

Reassured by this offhand snark, Buffy made herself turn away, looking instead to where Dawn looked. "My god," she said, voice lowered by shock and awe as she stared out over the valley. Scattered fires patched a stretching sea of darkness, and dim beacons swung across the sky. A siren wailed faintly in the distance, and then a chopper passed across the source, sound beating out sound. Other lights in the sky were circling at regular intervals.

"I've been up here for hours." Dawn's voice was flat.

A blossom of fire appeared to the east, the dull boom of detonation reaching them a moment later. They watched in silence.

"Maybe they blew up the high school," Dawn said after a minute. Buffy recognized the futile attempt to find a silver lining where there was none; recognized also how she'd taught Dawn by example. Making ironic jokes in the face of evil was just a new spin on the copy-cat games of childhood, when Dawn used to steal into her room and use her make-up, admiration of her big sister disguised as petty annoyance.
"A grand Sunnydale tradition," said Buffy. But what she'd meant as lightness failed on delivery, her voice as darkly bereft as her sister's. Humor couldn't take this down to scale. It was too big, too wrong.

She failed by example. And she was afraid.

Footsteps sounded behind them. Buffy, knowing them, didn't turn. Willow and Tara drew into line alongside her, Tara draped in a shawl that couldn't have been hers, Willow bare to the light chill.

Tara drew in a shaky breath. "All that burning."

Buffy had nothing to offer at this. She might have reached out and touched Tara's arm under the shawl, but it didn't seem a moment for comfort. She couldn't even comfort herself. Profoundly disconnected, she stood alone among family and friends and thought about how she might have stopped this from happening, if only she'd known.

Willow, catalyst to her regrets, said coldly, "When we make our own fires, the demons will be our tinder."

A dark thought for the darkness, the words lingered as they looked out over the valley, a frayed thread of women arrayed along a watchtower. Watching their captured city struggle in its bed, like something raped. Like something terrible being born.

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The End

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Blooper Reel, Out-takes, Lunacy, Miscellany, and Madonna

(with spoilers for this ep)

"Dead things are usually at the bottom of the food chain," said Spike.

yawping, jingoistic, humorless, moronic wankers

Spike: Gee, you're ace. / lightweight / crashingly uneuphonic

truculence

Wow! You're really impressive - and so masculine. I wish I were more like you. You're great. And not just an heroic figure to all men either, but a huge success with the ladies too, I have absolutely
no doubt about that. You've slept with lots of women haven't you? Just loads. Yes you have. Thanks for your input; we all thought you were dead manly and irresistible to anyone with a uterus already, but your words just confirm it. Cheers. [from Mil’s Apology Homepage]

"Dashed shame, old chap." Spike affected vim and sincerity. All he needed was a monocle and he’d be Bertie Bloody Wooster.

Spike to Raus: "Stop showing off your dental work and give me a hand."

Spike: "Life's a vogue, Slayer, so get up on the dance floor."
Spike: "Beauty's where you find it."
Spike: "Strike a pose. Nothing to it."
Spike: "You made me feel shiny and new."

Buffy: "...and you rampaging around like Rambo and Spike quoting Madonna to me."

Spike: "Look around--everywhere you turn is heartache, it's everywhere you go--"
Buffy: "You're quoting *Madonna* to me?"
(Spike double-take on himself.)

Psychic: "You call without words. He is lying in your bed, in the shape your body has left, and thinking of snow angels. They say a carpenter is our redeemer. Why don't you go home to him, vampire."

[You leave wordless calls on the answering machine]

Spike: "Here we are now. Entertain us."

Spike: "Frelling demons."
Buffy: "What did you just say?"

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"For tonight, anyway."
"Buffy..." Xander hesitated, one hand against the strap of his gun. "It's not night yet."
Anyahad her arms wrapped around herself as if feeling the chill. "Or it still is."
"It's...it's five o'clock," said Tara.

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FACTORY: Buffy watched him walk off, feeling as tense as he sounded, then twitched as Dawn appeared at her side. "Don't plan on sleeping in that corner," she said, jerking a thumb over her shoulder. "That's where they tossed the leftovers."
She dreamed she was in the factory, old and tired, a soldier who never got leave.

They weren't excelling at the survival game

peeled his lips back to show teeth

Any. Frequently predictable but infinitely scary.

All vampires: gay, gay, gay!

____________________

In "Welcome to the Hellmouth" Buffy's weapons stash included communion wafers. I thought this was pretty funny. What the hell would you use them for?

Buffy, to vampire: "Eat this."
Vamp: "No!"
Buffy: "The divinity of Christ is contained in the wafer."
Vamp: "Bugger off."
Buffy: "Come on. Just a taste. Mmm, good."
Vamp: "No."
Buffy: "You can crumble them up in blood. Adds texture."
Vamp: "Well...all right."

____________________

The club was thumping with music, strobing and flickering with white light. Beams cut through darkness and illegal smoke and plucked puzzle pieces from the chaos of dancing bodies on the floor of the Bronze. Demons and vampires waved their arms in the air, dancing indiscriminately with each other and passing victims through the crowd into the growing mosh pit by the stage.

--I hear your voice, it's like an angel sighing--

Above it all, a pair of polished boots strode slowly toward the edge of the catwalk. If anyone had looked to heaven with a dying glance, they would have seen the dark flare of a cloak being thrown back, revealing the iron-sharp crease of trousers. The silver glint of a belt buckle. Black gloves.

--feels like flying--

Black tunic.

--close my eyes, oh God I think I'm falling--

Cigarette smoke swirling.

--out of the sky, I close my eyes--
The tilt of a chin, an inhalation that sharpened cheekbones.

--Heaven help me.

Spike drew the cigarette from his mouth and added his exhalations to the haze that hung over the dancers. He squinted, bemused by the celebration, and shook his head. "Bloody Madonna," he scoffed, and flicked his cigarette disdainfully down into the melee. The bodies below writhed with oblivious abandon, fragmenting chopply in the electric light.

[tunic] shouldered by gleaming bars of rank

Come to think, he wouldn't mind killing something now. He had the uniform. It seemed right.

"He who is not with us, is against us."

Conversation a la Anya. Frequently predictable, infinitely disturbing.

"And we care why?" asked the colonel, and wandered off in the wrong direction, out of the light and into the shadows.

"Sir." Raus hurried after him. "Sir, the ceremonies are this way--"

"Bugger me." The colonel paused at the southern edge and stared out in hushed awe over the valley. It was an impressive sight. Scattered fires patched a stretching sea of darkness, and dim spotlights swung across the sky. A siren wailed faintly in the distance, and then a chopper flew past, sound beating out sound. "I can see you've resolved to ruin or to rule the state," he said after several moments. His voice was cynical, and Raus bristled.

"We are the chosen ones," he said earnestly, "those born with the strength and skill to lead the world to a new stage in its evolution--this is our destiny." He pulled his shoulders back slightly. "Sir."

"The chosen ones," repeated the colonel. "Yes." With a distracted look, he returned to the other side of the roof. Raus flanked him, arms laced behind his back, and peered down into the street. A podium had been set up in front of several rows of metal chairs, around which were situated TV cameras to capture a variety of photogenic angles. The chairs were filled with soldiers and officers restlessly chatting with one another, while on stage behind the podium sat a row of stiff generals, passing congratulatory smiles back and forth. A long banner bearing the Imperial seal hung down the front of the white marble building. Museum, Raus thought.
Officers.

- Field Marshal
- General
- Lieutenant General
- Major General
- Brigadier
- Colonel
- Lieutenant Colonel
- Major
- Captain
- Lieutenant
- Second Lieutenant.

Other Ranks:

- Warrant Officer Class 1
- Warrant Officer Class 2
- Staff Sergeant
- Sergeant
- Corporal
- Lance Corporal
- Private

Chapter End Notes

Huge gratitude and thanks to everyone who has written me in this past month and, uh, ever. Depression lingered, and your e-mails continue to go unanswered because I suck, but thank you for reading. And thanks to everyone who reads but doesn't write--that's fine too.

So, you know, I always say this is not beta-read, and that's not hubris, it's actually a subtle psychological crutch that I reiterate for my own comfort, in that I like to consider this a work-in-progress so that I can write fast and loose and not feel the angst and agita and pressure that comes with final drafts. I know you don't *think* I write fast and loose, but actually, when I am writing, I tend to write fast.

Spike/Buffy is so very right. Don't tell me otherwise or I will slay you in effigy.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
When he walked onto the balcony, the sky had lightened to a milky-white drape beyond the rooftops, whose dark, irregular slopes reminded him of Prague, though they never had before. The balcony itself, he noticed, was carved from heavy stone and guarded on either side by elaborate gargoyles, leering heads and tongues outstretched to lick at the air.

His head turned right and through the balcony railings he noticed the cobblestones of the street below, broad and ancient, striped down the middle with a reflective rain puddle that captured the sky. The sky was everywhere, an overcast glory of pale grey, no individual clouds breaking its surface. He lifted his tea cup and was surprised to find it held tea. A white drape lifted in the breeze to wrap itself around his leg, then flounced back against the open French doors.

For a moment he'd mistaken it for a dog.

Spike turned, and his reflection smiled unpleasantly and said, "William." He looked out of place there in the doorway, an anachronism in a Nazi uniform against the shadowed, Victorian interior of his townhouse. Which should be in London, but this was Prague. Or...Sunnydale?

He was sleek in black and carried a sidearm, but it was just a mirror, he realized, and turned away. He lifted his tea-cup again and discovered that the white china now held an oblong of blood, its surface rippling. He set it carefully on the balcony rail and watched it settle until a bird winged past, and as his eyes lifted to trace its flight he saw the woman across the way, standing on the balcony of her own building, curtains blowing behind her through open doors. She wore UC Sunnydale sweats and her hair was lank, face drained of color. Drained to a living death. Her arms hung heavily by her sides as she stared. Spike took an instinctive step back, prickling with dread at her motionless, watchful form. But retreating, he felt behind his shoulder blades her perfectly replicated presence, a mass of cold air and pressure that arrested his movement. If he'd needed to breathe he would have choked.

The gun was heavy and strange in his hand as he lifted it to shoot her. She was human--could anyone truly call him that now?--but the chip didn't fire. The gun didn't either. When he pulled the trigger, it blossomed silently into a flag which said, Bang! Oh, classic, he thought, despite his stark raving terror. And then the woman embraced him from behind, sliding a hand between his legs, whispering in his ear.

You killed me for nothing.

He could feel her other hand inside him, rooting around his rib cage, searching for his heart.
Less than a snack. Tart on a tea-tray, sir. Killed me for a fancy uniform.

He looked into the long mirror at himself, watching the blood spread on his shirt-front. He could see the wind blowing behind him, waves chopping the water as the day darkened and blustered. Tower Bridge in the distance, a bell tolling. His first, fledgling kill peeped over his shoulder with a smile for him, brown-curled and bright-eyed, with kitchen smuts on her face. She was his last kill, too, flickering into a school spirit.

He wore glasses, and his hair was curled. He was dressed for the opera and looked scared. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Colonel Liyoge leaning against the railing, writing in a black notebook. He was inscribing Spike's proper name, which would bind him.

"I didn't kill you," Spike said primly to the dead girl. "They killed you. I just watched."

And you drank.

"Not in bloody AA, am I," he shot back, voice harder.

Dru curled around the other side of him, her vampire reflection smiling at him in the mirror. "Remember how this feels, my shining man?" She pulled his neck back and sank her fangs in, and he cried out as a flock of dark birds shattered the sky, as they became white against black, inverting like a photo-negative or an Escher painting, and Paris spiraled around him, the lights quilting the streets as he dizzily fell to his knees. He couldn't unfasten her; he was dying in the cold and sharp air of the balcony, winter on the brink of snow.

"There's my bright knight," Dru crooned, leaning over him, her hair a dark curtain, fangs a red smile. "No more ghosts and shadows to bother you." Her fingers trailed something wet across his cheek.

"Won't be a tin soldier," he whispered. He turned his head past her pooling skirts to stare at the city lights, which blurred as he lay dying. "You can't mend the toys you break. I'm not going to come back." "You'll come home when the stars go blue, when the moon eats your head." He forced his greying gaze back to her and saw Buffy leaning over him, hair lank, face white, her bloodied UC Sunnydale sweats hanging off her thin form. "You'll come to this," she promised in a dull, empty voice.

"No," he croaked through his torn throat, eyes widening with horror. "No!"

But blood filled his mouth, and--

Spike woke on a small intake of breath, and found himself face to face with a ticking clock. It was quiet, wherever he was, the kind of quiet you get with a pricey hotel room. He lifted his head from the ridiculously soft pillow and spotted his cigarettes near the clock, lighter resting on top. Something familiar, and his mind clicked on. New digs.

He sat up, ran a hand over his head, and automatically reached for his smokes. As the lighter
neared the tip, he paused, catching sight of himself in the tailor's mirror across the room: sitting on
the edge of his four-postered bed in black silk pajama bottoms, hair mussed, hands paused in
surprise. He was frowning, but lowered his eyes after a moment to resume lighting up.

He hadn't quite gotten used to that dead wanker staring back at him.

The dream lingered, leaving a bad taste in his mouth that tobacco didn't erase. What now--was he
going to go all sodden and soulful like Angel just because he'd necked around with someone else's
corpse?

"I didn't kill her," he said aggrievedly, then looked up again and saw the woman's ghost behind
him in the mirror, watching with dull, steady eyes. He jumped up and whirled, stumbling against
the bedside table. This was the moment you were supposed to realize there was nothing there, and
there wasn't. But was that a dent on the bed covers? He glanced cautiously into the mirror, saw
nothing but what was supposed to be reflected. And himself. "Cobwebs in the brain," he muttered,
toughening up to dismiss the vision and deciding he was not at all shaky.

"Benny!" he called, raising his voice to a commanding bark. Then, under his breath: "Drag your
hairy little carcass in here." He sucked down carcinogenic smoke as he carelessly pulled on his
robe, and squinted as Benny entered. With his dark red fur, expressionlessly correct face, and
butler's uniform the Hanomag resembled a particularly colorful but dour species of baboon.

"Good morning, sir." He held out a silver tray, on which a folded newspaper rested.

run a bath," he said as an afterthought.

"Very good, sir. And the temperature of the water?"

"Somewhere between blood and coffee'll do." He was already immersed in the inner society pages,
ignoring the front-page headline. 'Rebel Nest Burned Down' it said in forty-point type.

Old Factory in Flames.

The tunnel they crept through was part of the older network of sewer ducts which knit together the
waterside, its bricked sides curving as they rose to a dripping, vaulted ceiling. Even Buffy rarely
visited this area of town. The demons who hung around the marina or lodged in the sea caves
tended to be peaceable and damp.

Willow was feeling her way forward, a phosphorescent leader light glowing and bobbing ahead of
her, casting green stripes across her red hair.

"Where is this supply stash of yours?" Buffy asked, her skepticism renewed by the distance they'd
traveled.

"Not much farther. The light will take us right to it." Willow's voice sounded assured and clear,
even though the hunch of her delicate shoulders hinted at burdens. Well, if she was still feeling
guilty, good for her. Blame hadn't yet rolled off Buffy's schedule, and it added a strain between
"It smells like dead fish," Dawn said from behind them, her words echoing like the plink of water drops. "We aren't going to stay down here, are we?"

Buffy didn't look back as she edged along the narrow walkway, boots picking a path from stone to crumbling stone. "I don't know yet, Dawn." As they reached a cross-tunnel, she leaped nimbly off the walk to a gritty rise of shell, silt, and sand that appeared to have been deposited by a hole far above them, and looked back to see how the others were faring. Tara was easing along the wall, skirts brushing and catching on its rough surface, while Xander followed Buffy's lead by stepping off the walk, plunging himself mid-boot into the fishy water. He looked like a hunter with his heavy plaid shirt, four-day growth of beard, and gun. There was soot on his face and his clothes, an abrasion on his temple. Buffy knew she probably looked much the same. Well, except for the beard.

"Here," Willow called. She'd moved ahead down the cross-tunnel. "It's right through here."

They all followed as she led them to a massive, heavily rusted iron door and unwitched it with a few words and waves. "I put some barrier spells on it, just in case," she said, stepping back to let Xander tug it open. It screeched as he pulled, and everyone briefly paused with ears cocked before he resumed. Inside, Willow's witchlight expanded until the cavern glowed from its diffuse source. Everyone looked around at the petrified seaweed, sandy floor, and stacked crates. A moist, chilly draft that smelled of the ocean snaked around them.

"We aren't staying here," Buffy turned to assure Dawn with dry emphasis.

Dawn grimaced critically and folded her arms. "Uh, no kidding."

"It wasn't meant to be habitable," Willow said defensively, then caught Tara's glance of concern and reformed her face into an effortful smile. "It's just a kind of U-Store-It by the sea."

"Did your visions show you where we're sleeping tonight?" Dawn asked, raking Willow with a cool gaze.

The lines of Willow's face set more rigidly and her patience looked worn, if not ready to snap. Buffy walked between her and Dawn, drawing their attention away from each other. "So what have we got here?"

"Canned goods, sleeping bags, weapons, magic supplies. Also, flashlights, candles, blankets, cots, bandages, clothes from the Salvation Army...." There was a pause. "I had a lot of time to plan," she said diffidently, at their looks.

Xander opened a crate with a Red Cross logo and peered at the contents. "This will be useful. And Xander Harris, delivery boy, is at your service. Question is--where to?" He looked up and the light sloped off the grim edges of his face. "They found the factory. They have to know we took to the tunnels."

"But we don't even know if they were looking for us," Tara said. "In particular, I mean." She checked their expressions. "Do we?"

"Guess that's true. After all, everyone in hiding's suddenly a 'rebel'." Xander made irony quotes with his hands and his mouth got a wry curve to it. He shook his head once. "May gremlins eat their propaganda machine."

"So do they find us?" Dawn's question challenged Willow, the angles of her slim body jutting with
Willow stared her down and said evenly, "I don't know."

"They kinda shortchanged you on the vision deal, huh? Hope you got your deposit back."

"Enough," Buffy said, before Willow could respond. "The snark isn't helping."

Dawn raised her brows. "Never stopped you before."

It shouldn't be tiresome when people behaved as you expected--Buffy was used to thinking of predictability as a good, a constant against the whims of the Hellmouth. But everything had its downside. Something must have shown on her face, because Dawn buttoned up and shrugged herself away to investigate some crates. Given a respite from sisterly distractions, Buffy game-planned. "We'll triage the supplies, take whatever's portable, whatever we can't do without. We'll head to the old Initiative tunnels, make our base there for now."

"It's near the campus," Willow said, musing. "I've been thinking--they're controlling the phone lines and local cable, but maybe they didn't get everything. There's a research center at school; they're networked to a communications satellite. We might be able to contact Giles or Angel."

"Good." Buffy zeroed in on this suggestion with a sense of relief, and an optimism that years of experience couldn't entirely quash. "That's our next step then." If they could reach Giles, if she could just hear his voice, she wouldn't feel so alone.

"What about the Little Rascals?" asked Tara. "Are we going to bring them with us?"

"I don't think we have a choice." Buffy caught Dawn's quick glance of interest. "There's no safe place in town. And we certainly can't leave them where they are."

The jars were dusty and each one was distinctively shaped; they looked as if they belonged in the window of an antique store. Their contents too were peculiar. "Eye of newt, frog gizzards, chicken's feet--boysenberry preserves? What kind of place is this?" Dor, fingers trailing along the shelf edge, turned away and picked up a steer skull, stared into its empty eye sockets and shuddered. "Gross."

"Why don't you leave that stuff alone," Jason said. "If you break something, that crazy woman is going to come down here again."

He slumped on the couch and flipped through a battered copy of *Starlog* magazine he'd found. Near his feet Kerry and Marcos sat on an old, threadbare rug, flipping cards into each other's crossed legs.

Marcos grunted and looked up, expression haunted. "The way she stares at you--it's like a nightmare. Last time she pinched my cheek, man, then told me I needed to wash my face. Was like my nana came back from the grave or somethin'. And I don't even wanna know what's in those cookies." He eyed the snack plate suspiciously, then craned his head back as if trying to see through the basement ceiling. "You think she's really an ex-demon?"

"That's what Dawn said." Kerry reached out her hand for the water bottle Jason had uncapped,
"How can you be an ex-demon," Dor challenged from across the cluttered room. She was setting a pirate's hat on a mannequin's limbless torso. "What do they do, cut you from the hell squad? Take away your pom-poms?" She snorted a laugh.

"Maybe it's like when they defrock a priest," Marcos said. "But, you know, the opposite. Like, she wasn't unholy enough?"

"This is tired." Jason threw the magazine aside. "We're just sitting here. We should be getting busy on this action. Fighting, helping."

"I could kick some demon ass," Kerry said. She flipped her last card and jumped to her feet, pouring herself into a few graceless kicks. "Whooah, wahhh," she huffed, bouncing toward Dor, shadow boxing with the air. Dor ignored her until she side-kicked the mannequin, sending it crashing into a work-table with a cry of, "Take that, monster bimbo!"

"Hey!" Dor watched her plastic friend go flying, and turned with irritation. "Stop acting out your broken-home issues with my toys."

"She had it coming," Kerry sneered dramatically. "Beating up on my woman." She yanked Dor by the hips into a parodic embrace and air-smooched her.

"Mom didn't even have any arms," Dor pouted, pushing her away and righting the mannequin on its stand.

The door to the basement opened and the girls looked up to see Anya standing on the top step, hands on her hips. "Busted," Kerry murmured.

"What's going on down here?" The persnickety tone was followed by the click-clack of heels as Anya descended the steps. "I heard merchandise crash," she said accusingly, then narrowed her eyes when neither girl responded. "This stock isn't easily replaceable now that we're cut off from the rest of the world by a huge magical barrier."

"Sorry, ma'am." Dor had something of an authority reflex, despite her rap sheet. "We'll be more careful."

"You do that." Anya drew herself up slightly, curls bobbing. "I may not be a demon these days, but I still have a few spells in my repertoire. It's not pleasant having your lips zipped, let me tell you. You'd think you could just unzip them, but try it when the zipper's on the inside. Knotting a cherry stem is child's play compared to that. So watch it." She minced back upstairs, leaving a wake of awe.

Dor's fingers had raised tentatively to her lips as if afraid of finding a zipper there, and her eyes were wide. "Some things should stay figures of speech."

Anya closed the basement door, wishing she had someone to grumble to about those darn kids. Endangering her merchant status with their rumpus--what if a soldier had come in? Loneliness was
having no one to share your complaints, to pull up a chair and pour you a cup of coffee and nod as you explained how your significant other wore every piece of clothing he owned twice before doing laundry, and how certain people really shouldn't insult your hair color when they got theirs out of the same box.

Her poor shop was empty, its bright lights ineffectual against the darkness outside. She wasn't one to brood, but she hadn't realized how much she liked the sunny balm of Sunnydale until the terribly literal Dark Ages arrived, enveloping the town in perpetual midnight and mist. If anyone had asked her opinion, she'd have said, why invade under cover of darkness when you can invade in cheerful sunshine? Like it made any difference on the Hellmouth. She supposed it was a concession to the vampires, though. This is what happened when you compromised with your allies, which is why she never did.

The bells over the door rang while she was pouring her own lonely cup of joe, and she turned, ready to exert herself with a beaming smile. "Oh," she said, smile dropping away, "It's just you." She was not at all nervous of Spike, but the way he stood in the doorway, mist rolling in around his ankles, made a favorable dramatic impression on her. A uniform lent certain men an aura of sexual power, and though she knew it was supposed to be wrong, she wouldn't have been unhappy to see Xander decked out for the winning side--she would have enjoyed undecking him. The cool way Spike sauntered into her shop annoyed Anya, though, wakening a thousand yawning years of demonic cynicism.

"Snazzy uniform. Who'd you have to kill?"

She didn't miss the sharp, disquieted look that passed across Spike's face before he hid it. "I've been commissioned. I'm a captain."

"Really? What's your ship named?"

"Not that kind of captain," he said as if she were an idiot.

"Oh, you're an officer." She cradled her coffee cup, continuing brightly, "I should have known, because you have a weapon shaped like a penis on your hip." Spike glanced at his gun. "They issue those to compensate for impotence. In my experience, the higher the rank, the more pitiful a man's sexual prowess is."

His initial male reflex of outrage had relaxed and he was waiting her out now, an expression of dry patience on his face. "Save your analysis for Alexander the Nate. The Big Bad doesn't need any compensation." He leered in a not unfriendly fashion.

"They say referring to yourself in the third person is a sign of dissociation and mental illness."

"They do, do they? Clever boots. What, you studying to get your sheepskin now?"

Anya sighed and slumped a little. "Willow left one of her psychology textbooks here. That's how bored I am, reading dry prose about bed-wetters and the electrical complex."

"I think you mean the Electra complex, ducks."

"Whatever...do you think I'm bipolar?"

Spike took out a silver cigarette case. "Like Mum Earth herself."

"No smoking in the shop." Anya pointed to a calligraphied sign on the wall. It was unsociable of her, though, and she half-regretted it, then wondered whether to offer him a cup of coffee. Was it so
wrong to want some company?

He removed the cigarette from his lips with long-suffering grace and shoved it back in his coat pocket. "Where's Buffy, then--she been around?"

Oh, of course, Anya thought. He wasn't here to exchange gossip with a lowly shopkeep. It was all about Buffy. "I'm not supposed to tell," she said, feeling strangely resentful. "You should go. If Xander sees you, he'll kill you. Really kill you I mean, not just posture and threaten and sock you on the jaw."

"Yeah, I'm all a-flutter."

"His gun is bigger than yours."

Spike's outrage returned in force. "I don't think so!" he scoffed, jerking his head back like an insulted rooster. Suddenly the shop bells rang again; they both shifted for a view of the door. A demon with sleepy eyes and elegant facial crests strolled in, holding a handkerchief in one hand and a natty cane in the other. He was dressed in a black wool coat that matched Spike's, but his uniform and cap were grey.

"Oh, there you are, Aurelius." He stepped down into the shop, joining them with a sniff that he immediately covered by pressing the handkerchief to his nose. "By Sytos, this cold is miserable. I can't seem to shake it. There's nothing else for it--you'll have to help me get drunk." His sleepy eyes blinked and fixed on Anya. He lowered the handkerchief and raised a monocle in its place, screwing it into one ridged socket. "And who is this utterly charming damsel?"

"Er, Anya. Anya..." Spike paused blankly, at a loss.

"Christina Emanuella Jenkins," she finished, extending her hand instinctively to be kissed. The demon obliged with old-world courtesy. Spike, who might have benefited from the example of a real gentleman, rolled his eyes. "And you are?"

"Delighted," said the demon, showing polished teeth and no sign of letting go of her hand.

"Colonel Sordicov," Spike said, hurrying along the introductions.

"Call me Rick," the demon corrected smoothly.

Anya blinked. "Rick?"

"Short for Lothrick. But that's the only area in which I'm short, my dear."

"Oh." Anya pulled her hand back, rethinking her flirtiness.

Colonel Sordicov didn't seem put off by her withdrawal; his gaze roamed across her cherry-sprigged dress, making her wish she'd put on a sweater. But also making her glad she'd worn the dress. "Come for a drink with us, won't you?"

Spike shot her a look that said don't you dare, which Anya would have ignored if it had suited her. But she had no intention of going off in the middle of the day to tipple with demons who weren't suitably ex, especially since it would mean closing the shop and losing what little money was coming into the till. "I'm afraid I'm terribly busy, er, stocking and restocking. The stocking keeps me running," Sordicov looked with candid interest at her legs. "You know how it is for us working girls." She flipped one hand in a what-can-you-do gesture, feeling a bit light-headed. Spike's expression suggested a reevaluation of her sanity.
"Pity. But you must get out sometime." Sordicov raised his polished walking stick like a baton as a thought struck him. "Of course--you'll come to the inaugural ball."

"Probably not a good idea," Spike drawled warningly.

Sordicov peered through his monocle at him. "Why ever not?" Nonplussed, Spike met Anya's eyes and hesitated a fatal moment, allowing the demon to roll smoothly over the objection. "I'll have my secretary put you on the invitation list," he told Anya, before turning languidly to Spike. "Come along, Captain. The gin won't drink itself. Good day, my lady."

"Good day," Anya echoed doubtfully, as they swept out side by side like fashion twins in search of a catwalk. What was an inaugural ball anyway, she wondered. And was it the kind of thing that required a new gown?

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The cavernous room which had headquartered the Initiative still bore the scars of the final battle that had raged there, orchestrated by Adam and waged by his demon minions. The walls were riddled with bullet holes and crumbling in places, and the floor was a tangled nest of cords and cables which had once powered their equipment. Here and there bloodstains were still visible on the tiles, not all of them nonhuman.

"Bet they didn't get back their cleaning deposit," Xander said. He dropped his crate with a thud next to Willow's and examined his hands, which looked as filthy and splintered as her own. With no way to clean them, he let them fall again, attention moving on. "Didn't this place have its own generator?" Drawing his gun to the ready, he headed off in search of things to fix.

Willow's heart had swelled with renewed admiration for him these last few days, until it pained her almost physically. He'd taken up arms against their oppressors with the same fervor she felt. Of all of them, Xander had always understood her best, and she was sure he'd come around to see that her decisions had been necessary. The secrets she'd kept had hurt him, but if she could do everything all over again...she wouldn't change anything. It made things easier to deal with, if you accepted the inevitability. In all honesty, that had never been her strong point, but it was the only thing that had kept her from breaking.

Quietly, keeping herself to the fringes, she began unrolling sleeping bags and arranging them in neat rows. Tara helped with her nimble fingers and Willow found it hard not to stop everything she was doing and take those hands in hers, all rough and scraped, and kiss them. There were still facets to her life that had nothing to do with demons.

"This is where Riley used to work?" Dawn asked the room at large, stepping past her.

"Welcome to your secret neighborhood government base."

"So this is where my tax dollars go." Dawn folded her arms. "Hmmph."

Buffy sat back on her heels from the crate she was inspecting. "You don't pay tax dollars, Dawn. I pay tax dollars."

"Not anymore."
"Yes, the demons have saved us from taxes. Yay."

The sisterly give-and-take made Willow smile, even if she didn't feel comfortable joining in as she once would have.

"I wouldn't count on that," Tara said dryly. "They say death and taxes are universal constants."

Buffy grimaced. "They've certainly got the death part covered." Her words effectively quieted everyone.

"So, where are we exactly?" Dawn asked a few moments later, changing the subject.

"Right under the campus," Buffy said, unpacking a crate of food and making an inventory of the contents. "They sealed off the entrance from Lowell house, so we shouldn't have any visitors. There's no one left who even knows this exists."

"Do you think there's anyone up there now?" Tara glanced ceilingward.

"Doesn't matter. This is completely sound-proof. No one will ever know we're here."

The high ceilings of the Initiative compound were in fact heavily insulated, and above them rested the weight of earth a hundred feet deep. Above that sprawled the wine cellars of Lowell House, decorated with the ceremonial paddles and heraldic shields of fraternal initiations that stretched back for generations past. And, finally, atop it all, sat Lowell House itself, a spacious mansion emptied of its rightful tenants and appropriated for the ranking elite of the New Grauth Reich.

Boots crossed paths along the polished floors, and laughter rose from knots of uniformed men, busily drinking and trading gossip with one another as the cocktail hour got underway.

"Not bad for an officer's club," Sordicov commented, shrugging off his coat. Spike stood to one side feeling inexplicably out of place, bristling as hands slid up his shoulders, then awkwardly submitting to the white-jacketed servant who was taking his own coat. He shadowed Sordicov as they passed through the foyer; to the right was a bar room filled with standing men and hung with smoke, to the left, a large room filled with round tea-tables and generous club chairs, into which Sordicov led them. A fire crackled on the hearth.

It took Spike a moment to identify his unease as niggling recognition. "Hey, I know this place. Farm Boy used to live here, back when he was--" And realization hit him with a small sizzle of shock that felt not unlike the chip firing in his head. Initiative headquarters. There was a lump of irony for you.

Sordicov gazed at him blankly. "Who d'you say?"

"Er, not important," Spike said. All the times he'd lain around his crypt drunk and wondered how his own personal history had become so entwined with those of humans, he'd traced the blame to here. His downfall had started in the containment cells and labs hidden below, where they'd taken everything that made him bad and handicapped it with a trick joy-buzzer no bigger than a thimble. He gazed sharply around, but of course nothing remained of the house's previous inhabitants, and
as they took seats at a table amid the joviality of officers and bustle of waiters, he began to relax.

One of the white-jacketed servants came up to their table, looking nervous and not at all like a waiter. Spike glanced idly at his name-tag, which read 'Jonathan.' Kid looked familiar.

"W-what can I get you gentlemen?" the boy said in a subdued voice.

"Two martinis," Sordicov said, then turned to Spike. "What'll you have?"

"Same." The kid nodded, gave Spike an odd little glance, and scraped himself away to fetch their drinks. Spike's eye was drawn past his retreating back, to a corner of the room where a pair of demons sat smoking cigars and chatting amiably. At the feet of one sat a human girl in a sparkly, ill-fitting gold dress that had rucked up around her thighs, revealing long legs and bare feet. She stared off into space while the officer caressed her hair as one might pet a dog.

Spike had seen worse than this in his long unlife. Vampires took pets too, and tended to be careless with them, forgetting to feed them, or feeding from them too greedily, until one day you woke up and found a pale form lying cold and stiff on the carpet, like a canary at the bottom of its cage. Dru had liked pets, but she called them all dolls.

Sordicov, noticing his stare, said, "Nicely feathered tail on that bird, what?" He took Spike's silence as agreement. "You got your own yet?"

"My own?" Spike repeated as their drinks arrived.

"Tootsie. Bit of fluff. The humans are warm-blooded, I hear. Keep you toasty at night. Haven't tried one myself, yet, but there's this place I can take you--"

A martini glass spilled, its contents spreading across the pristine white tablecloth toward Spike's hand. The waiter gasped and stammered, "I'm s-sorry, sir. I'll, uh, get you another." His pudding of a face was white with shock, far out of proportion to the minor accident, but before Spike could form a reply, a demon in bow-tie and black tails came up, hands clasped and shoulders tucked in with the formal deference of maitre d's the world over.

"Gentlemen, please accept my apologies. We'll have this cleared away immediately." He raised one hand and snapped his fingers at someone as their waiter shuffled nervously to the side. "This creature's clumsiness will not go unpunished," he added, glaring at the boy, who looked sickly at his words.

"Oh, don't exert your arm on our account, my good man," Sordicov said negligently, sipping at his first martini. "Hardly worth getting excited about. In a few minutes, the brain cells on which this incident are imprinted will be drowned and eradicated by the very elixir spilled here."

Everyone gaped at him a moment in respect, and bolstered by this display of noblesse oblige, Spike felt safe weighing in. "Yeah, what he said." The kid, whose hang-dog attitude suggested someone who tried hard not to be noticed, lifted his head to gaze at Spike with a relieved, amazed look that was strangely disturbing. Where had he seen him before?

"Very good, sirs," murmured the maitre d', before shoving the waiter off. Discreet hands had already cleared away the glass, laid a napkin, brought more drinks.

"So, as I was saying." Sordicov settled back and stroked his thin mustache. "It's about time you got yourself a wench."
Buffy wasn't enthused about the results of her inventory, but there was something reassuring on a very primal level about the tidily stocked cans and boxes. "Looks like we'll be having canned beans and Lipton cup-a-soup until we're about thirty," she told the others. "But hey, at least we have food." The fluorescents went on above them with almost magical timing. "And lights, too. Yay, Team Xander."

"Well, I just waved my hand and said, 'Lo, let there be light,'" Xander explained as he rejoined them. "And, after much cursing and a severe electrical shock...lo occurred." He flourished his hand again at the ceiling to demonstrate.

"You're like a god," Tara observed, smiling.

"The gods must be hungry, then. Because I could eat," he paused assessingly before the food pyramid, "a lot of canned beans, apparently."

"Sorry, guys." Willow edged out of the shadows, nearing their circle. "There was a sale."

"Beans are good." Xander looked sideways at her. His face was hard, voice flatter than normal, but his words seemed to reach out, a small gesture she looked pathetically grateful for. Buffy felt less generous, and yet the open hope of Willow's face worked on her, softening her up.

"After dinner we'll get the kids, then head onto campus and look for the satellite lab," she said, focusing on business to avoid the mangle of social interaction.

"Yeah," Xander put in, "it should be dark by then...oh, wait." He shook his head. " Weird. Can't get used to this whole 'great darkness' thing. Since when are prophecies so literal?" He sat on a crate as Buffy began opening cans of food.

"Maybe they need the darkness," Tara said. She looked Willow's way for confirmation. "They might be sensitive to sunlight, like vampires. That's pretty unusual in other demon species, though--right, Willow?"

Willow glanced up from the hole she'd been picking in her jeans. "Well, not too unusual. But it's mostly the subspecies that are nocturnal--things that go slither in the night. Intelligent species are usually able to tolerate sun."

"Vampires must be loving this," Xander said in disgust. "It's like vamp mecca. They'll probably gather here from far and wide, hit the beaches in droves, moon themselves by the seashore." He paused as heads turned his way, and Buffy raised her brows with interest. "Moon as in lay out under the moon in modestly fitted swimsuits," he clarified with a brotherly glance at Dawn, who was unmoved by any double entendre.

"Except we're cut off from the rest of the world," Willow pointed out quietly.

"We're sure this isn't happening anywhere else?" The question was Buffy's own small gesture toward cordial relations, and Willow followed up while the others began eating.

"I don't think so. The barrier's there for a reason."

"Containment," Xander said shortly.
"But, c'mon, someone's going to notice." Dawn's expression was one of mingled hope and uncertainty. "I mean, hello, entire city missing? They'll call out the National Guard."

Everyone was silent, the only sound spoons scraping across metal, until Willow said carefully, "We don't know yet how the barrier works. It may be a while before our disappearance has an impact. We may be on our own for...for a while."

Buffy heard what Willow didn't say. If their disappearance wasn't noticed, it would be because of magic strong enough to bend the world around a gaping hole where Sunnydale had been. To cover them up for a while, as if they'd never existed. At least, that would work on most people, primed already to overlook everything that lurked in the shadows. Giles and Angel would know better and would figure out what had happened. The question was, were they strong enough to break their way in?

"That rig went right through the shield," Xander remembered. "Like we weren't even here. Not even a speedbump in the road." The memory seemed to hold them all captive for a moment.

"We'll be a bump again somehow," Buffy promised aloud for Dawn's sake, catching Willow's eye as she did.

"Yeah," Willow pitched in. "What goes up can come down, like corn harvests and, uh, stock markets." The sprightly zing with which she spoke was followed by a pronounced slump of her shoulders as she nibbled distractedly on a peanut, absorbed again in her own thoughts.

Buffy looked around at her friends, noting their collective tiredness. They were a ragged and dispirited bunch, and it made her afraid, down in that small, buried part of her that still wanted to wear footie pajamas and climb into sleep between her very married and immortal parents until morning came, sweeping all these bad dreams away. "Maybe now's the time to figure out what we know about these demon guys," she said, dispersing her fears by force of will. "Will? You want to kick off the exposition party?"

Willow's mouth fell open a little at the unexpected invitation, as the spotlight turned on her. "Uh, uh, sure. Okay." She gathered herself. "The stuff in Fenwhar's Demonology about the Grauth is mostly anecdotal--some monk back in the thirteen hundreds stumbled into a portal and, well, those are the boring details, but the book describes their culture and fighting tactics and stuff. I thought that would be useful, but after looking through it the other day, I think most of it's pretty outdated." Regret crossed her features.

"What is useful?" Buffy asked, fighting irritation.

"They're very interested in humans," Willow replied, licking her lips as if she tasted something weird or bad. "There are legends of them taking human children and raising them as their own. Other stories say they only enter our world at night, kidnapping virgins to take back with them into the underworld." She stole a look at Dawn. "They probably don't put much of a premium on the hymen anymore, though. Even demons have to get with the times."

"That's all pretty standard monster folklore," Tara said, frowning. "Fairies, werewolves, and elves were all accused of stealing children. Even Gypsies and Jewish people used to have that said about them." She radiated disapproval of this slander.

"True." Willow shrugged. "We can't really know yet why they're here. The Fenwhar mentions a few prophecies that were big back in the day. The Grauth think they're going to inherit the earth and lead it into a new age."
"And of course they're starting with Sunnydale," Xander said. There was a pause. "What's with the uniforms? They look like," he hesitated again, "like Nazis. I'm not the only one who noticed, am I?"

Willow shifted, putting down the bean can she'd been spooning from. "I think they're imitative. They may be attracted to our culture, want to blend in."

"Kinda laming on the fashion front, aren't they?" Buffy's lip curled in distaste at the thought of Nazi uniforms.

"I'm not sure they care." Willow held her eyes, her own hooding. "They've modeled themselves after the greatest evil the human race has ever known. That's no accident. They're demons, and if we don't stop them, they're going to make our world a barren hell where no one walks free."

Anyah, basket over her arm, wandered through the light throng of shoppers in search of bargains. She had to remind herself not to feel self-conscious or out of place. After all, she carried money and her money was as good as the next person's. She stopped at a stand on the corner of the square, where mounds of fruit and vegetables were piled in colorful array.

"Are those blood oranges fresh?" she asked the merchant, plucking one from the stand to examine. The demon lifted his hands in a lazy gesture of incomprehension. "Where did you get these? From a supermarket? From some old biddy's pantry?" With a distrustful sigh, she put the orange in her basket and passed him one of the little sticks she'd been accumulating. He slipped a bead off and handed it back.

Walking onward through the plaza, she marveled at how quickly the bazaar had sprung up in the town center. Strings of colored lights hung between tents and booths where vendors sold fruit and candies and chunks of questionable meat on skewers. Other tables were laden with a mix of clothes which looked as if they'd been liberated from store racks and people's closets. Some of the displays saddened her, especially the one of children's toys, but the chaotic spirit of free enterprise hanging over it all made her nearly giddy in compensation. It was hard to be sad in the face of so much entrepreneurship.

"New watch, miss?" A short, unprepossessing demon opened his trench-coat as if to flash her and showed off rows of wrist-watches, pinned inside.

"They look second-hand," she sniffed critically.

"Don't got to worry about no previous hands, miss." He flashed teeth that looked sharp enough to cut bone, and Anya hid a shudder that did not befit a former vengeance demon.

"No thank you."

Around her humans, demons, and vampires mingled as they went about their shopping, while among them strolled pairs of Grauth guards, enforcing civil obedience. Near a coffee counter a pair of game-faced vampires were crowding a human between them, leering as the man shrank in on himself and tried not to spill the cups he held. A soldier appeared and uttered a few sharp words, and the vamps muttered and slunk away. Released, the man disappeared quickly in the other
direction. He'd been wearing normal clothes, but with a red patch on his breast, a simple vee of

cloth that almost resembled a devil's head.

Anya looked around, noticing that the other humans present wore this same brand. Conscious of

her own lack, she positioned her scarf so that it covered where the brand would have been, and

plunged back through the crowd toward the magic shop. It was craven, perhaps, but she suddenly

wanted to retreat inside. Almost at once she was thrown off-balance, her shoulder bumped by a

vamp who snarled and grabbed her arm.

"Hey!" she said, struggling to free herself. "Get off me!"

The vampire, a female in a chic black sheathe, snaked her head to one side. "Very rude, for a

human. But maybe you haven't learned your place yet, so I'll let you apologize."

"Me apologize?" Anya said in vibrant, irrepressible indignation. "You ran right into me with your

massive, quarterback shoulders and size-ten Manolo Blahniks." A snarl answered her remarks, but

Anya, whose orange was rolling away like a ball between moving feet, was too annoyed to be

scared. "I've heard scarier growls from zoo lions, lady."

Vamping out, the other woman gave a more creditable roar and Anya was ready to jam a stake

between her pointy breasts when she felt herself tugged out of the vamp's grip. The guard who

parted them wore an expression of boredom, as if he'd been breaking up interspecies brawls all day.

"What's the trouble here?"

"This human has no signum," the vampire said in a cool hiss, twitching aside Anya's scarf and

smiling fangily at her dismay. It wasn't hard to figure out what a signum was, or why not having

one was bad.

"She bumped me," Anya countered in a faltering voice, trying to hold onto her righteousness. "I

lost my orange."

The guard turned, focusing his full attention on her as the vampire adjusted her skirt and slipped off

into the crowd. "Where's your signum?"

"Signum? Oh. I think I, I must have left it back in the shop. I keep a shop, right down there." She

pointed, but he even didn't look in that direction. His gaze remained trained on her. "It has a bird on

the door," she assured him. "That's good, right?"

"You have papers?"

"At the shop," she repeated, a little more desperate now. She hated bureaucracy. She'd never have

made a good city council member. What had she been thinking? "Plenty of papers. Reams and

reams. If you'll just let me take you there, I'll show you."

Her answer seemed to decide him. "You come with me."

"Oh, I can't. We're open until seven, and I hung a sign, back in five--" The guard took her arm and

dragged her along with him, still protesting. "I left muffins in the oven," she cried hopefully,

making up whatever sprang to her lips. "And the tea-kettle boiling. And there are four--four little

kittens who need to be fed, or they'll eat all the dried monkey fingers!"

Irritably, the guard stopped and grabbed her face. His fingers dug into her skin, squishing her

mouth into an "oh" and it was the surprise more than anything else that silenced her. "Be quiet

now, ka?" he said in a low, surly voice. "Or I will gag you with your pretty scarf, and carry you to
jail. And I will be not so happy when we get there."

"Jail?" she squeaked as he released her face. Real fear blossomed in her stomach, giving her an unpleasant sensation, like when she ate too many Gummi worms. "I'm going to jail? But who'll feed the kittens?"

Dor thought that a magic shop of all places would have cool drugs. Magic mushrooms, for sure, and witchy potions--maybe even some happy pills. Pills to make you larger, pills to make you small. But the shelves of Anya's basement didn't have any pills at all. It was no fun being Alice down the rabbit hole when all you had to play with was pressed frogs and skullcaps made into novelty ash-trays.

In her restless wanderings she had found a box of old books, though. The carton was labeled 'errata', which meant nothing to her. She drew out a book, opened the pages at random and became absorbed by the naughty pictures. Whoa. "Hey," she said absently to the others, who ignored her with bored slumps, "I think this is a spellbook." She traced her finger across a page and read slowly, "Ful-me-nos ve-ni-te--"

A tiny bolt of lightning leapt from the page and zapped her in the face. She squeaked and dropped the book. The others didn't even look up from their comics, but just as she was about to complain the rug began to twitch and everyone was suddenly alert and paying attention. The trap door was lifting. Jason grabbed the sword he'd been given and stood with it raised, while Marcos flipped back the rug and made a fist. Like if it was a vamp, he'd really get a punch in, thought Dor.

The door banged open and Buffy's head popped up. "Hold your fire," she said as she hoisted herself out of the tunnel. She was wearing a dykey plaid man's shirt over a stained tee, her face was dusty, and her hair was pulled back in a short ponytail. Dor wasn't quite sure what to make of Dawn's sister yet. She was bossy and athletic, kind of like a gym teacher. But she seemed to know what the hell was going on in Sunnydale, and for that alone Dor was ready to follow her anywhere. And the others too, like Xander, who was climbing out after Buffy--they possessed the inside scoop that raised chances of survival. They might look like your average losers, but right now they had the cool quotient of outlaws.

"How you guys hanging in there?" Buffy checked them over with a critical eye, as if they might have been getting into the stash. No such luck.

"I'm going to check on Anya," Xander told her, without a word of greeting for the rest of them before he climbed the basement stairs.

"When can we get out of here?" Kerry asked for all of them.

"Soon." Buffy seemed just as impatient as they felt, and was fistng her hands on her hips, close to a pair of knives that her lifted shirt revealed. "We've found a place to hole up. We'll take you there, and you can get some rest."

"Man, we been duffin' all day," Jason grumbled.

"Count yourselves lucky," Buffy said tartly. "You missed the fun crate-lugging portion of our
program."

Jason scowled. "We can help with that stuff. And we want to fight, too."

"Yeah," seconded Marcos. "Bust some demon heads. Bam, ka-pow, rat-a-tat-tat." He jiggled with restless macho energy and fizzed like a pop can about to blow. He'd been a sour voice of reason not three hours past, when Jason and Kerry were on their demon-ass-kicking kicks, but now all of a sudden he wanted in on the action. Twerp was showing off for Buffy's blonde sake, thought Dor. Kerry was so going to kick his ass if he didn't watch it.

Buffy only stared him down. "No bam, ka-pow. No rat-a-tat anything. These aren't things you want to fight unless you have to, believe me. These are the monsters under your bed all grown up. Most of us got drafted to fight them. You may want to think about what you're getting into before you enlist in this rebel army."

"So, what?" Jason's brows knit together resentfully. "While they're out there crashin' our town, we're supposed to just hide in the dirt?"

"You think that's a bad plan, padawan? Because let me tell you--"

Xander's boots clattered back down the stairs, and he paused midway, gun upright in one hand. "Anya's not there." His eyes swept over them darkly, but it was Buffy who turned and asked,

"Where is she?"

Dor shifted, spoke up when no one else did. "She said something about going down the street for a few minutes. She should be back by now. That was a while ago."

Xander and Buffy met each other's eyes for a moment. "I'll stay here," Xander said. "Wait for her."

"I'll take the kids back to the Initiative."

Kids, thought Dor. As if they were five year olds. But the expression on Buffy's face didn't invite back-talk. "Initiative?" she said instead. "What's that?"

Dawn had never seen the commando hide-out from the inside before. She'd only heard tell of it from Buffy and Spike and the others. Their descriptions had made it sound all top-secret and bad-ass, but it didn't seem very exciting to her. The Initiative must have taken the fun toys with them when they bugged out. The stripped desks and shelves said they'd left in a hurry, but not so much in a hurry that they'd abandoned anything interesting. You could see indentations in the floors where heavy equipment must have stood, and dust-bunnied outlines of clean tile, like when you moved a fridge.

"I'm going to take a walk around, check things out," she said to Tara and Willow.

She left them in a girlish tangle of limbs on one of the sleeping bags, waved off their warnings not to go far, and nosed her way through the empty halls. She was the explorer in her family, daring and unafraid and...was that a sound? She paused, head cocked, then drew a stake from her pocket...
The corridors were lit by some kind of emergency glow-strips that must have come on when Xander powered up the generator. Each of the stark white cells had its own low illumination, a small circle of light surrounded by shadows. This must be where they'd kept their captives, like Spike and Clem, and others who hadn't been so successful escaping the Initiative's experiments. It was an eerie, depressing place, the way Dawn imagined an insane asylum to be. In one of the cells, a blackened blood bag dangled from the ceiling like an oxygen mask, caught on an arm of machinery that had frozen in place, or maybe been yanked loose. In another, a perfect body-shaped shadow of dust lay on the tiles, undisturbed since its creation.
A chittering sounded in the corridor, herald of a rat. It scurried by Dawn, who watched it pass with a frown as she noticed it was wearing a small gold collar studded with jewels. "Huh," she said curiously, then turned to find herself face to face with a demon.

"And what brings a nice young lady like you into my office?"

The Grauth prefect of police smiled benignly at her and waved a hand toward one of the empty chairs in front of his desk. Anya took a seat, smoothing her skirt and nervously crossing her legs, then uncrossing them again. The man was leaning back in his comfy chair now and watching her, and though he seemed ready to listen to reason, Anya remembered how she used to feel whenever D'Hoffryn called her on the carpet for a botched curse or a low quota. The carpet had been the living skin of men who lay so closely and intricately curled that a visitor could spot no marks of humanity except the occasional downtrodden spine. That had been D'Hoffryn's rococo period.

Anya tried on a smile. "It's all a silly misunderstanding." She lifted a hand up as if to say what can you do? "I left my signum back at the shop. I didn't think I'd be more than a minute. I have a shop on Main Street, you know." She imparted this as if word of the local hot-spot might be carried to Sunnydale newcomers on the wind. "The Magic Box? We've had many customers in since the--" She hesitated, unsure if 'invasion' would be tactful. "Change of government." Still smiling in a matey fashion, she added, "There's a bird on my door."

The prefect raised his heavily ridged brows. "A signum terregnum?"

"Right!" That sounded official enough. She stood. "So, I'll just be getting back--"

"Sit."

She sat, and he leaned forward and considered her too closely. After a moment she got twitchy and opened her eyes wider, questioning his attention. When he still said nothing she got explicit. "Yes?"

"Is that your natural hair color?"

"Huh?"

He got up and came around the desk, rested his fleshy posterior against it and reached out a hand. Bewildered, she let him lift a few strands and examine them. "What do they call this? Honey? Wheat?"

"Mostly they call it hair."

The prefect cupped her chin, tilted her face left and right. Anya was quickly growing tired of strange men touching her without asking. It didn't matter that he was a demon. A man was a man was a man. She wouldn't have minded her powers back right about now, but since she was human and a ridiculously feeble one despite her gym membership, she tried to keep her mouth shut. It was difficult. Xander had often told her she was bad at it. She'd pointed out that he was too. Maybe that's why we're together, he'd said, and chucked her under the chin with a smile. She really wanted Xander with her right now.
God, she'd become such a woman.

"You are in your child-bearing years, ka?" he asked, releasing her face.

The hairs on the back of Anya's neck rose in a very human way. "Oh, not my peak child-bearing years." She uttered a short, forced laugh. "I'm well past those. Old, old, old. Washed up. Decrepit, even--"

The prefect loosened his necktie and pushed off from the desk. "Would you like a drink?" he said to her, crossing to a bar where he poured golden liquid into the kind of short, fancy glasses Anya had wanted to order from Pottery Barn, except she'd never been able to decide on the color and what a fool she'd been, because everyone knew that blue was the right color for cocktail glasses. Wasn't that true?

"I'm not supposed to drink," she said as he returned. "It makes me act inappropriately in public places."

His smile broadened, wrinkling the fine grey skin of his face. "Ah, but we're in a private place. Door locked, no one to bother us." He held out the drink until the gesture became prolonged and awkward and Anya felt compelled to take it.

"Isn't there some fine I could pay?" she asked, holding the cool glass carefully as if it were a coiled, deadly snake. The prefect of police took the chair next to her and stretched out his legs comfortably as she spoke, took a sip of his drink. "I mean, how serious is it to go out without your signum? I'm sure it could happen to anyone."

"Oh, it is a very serious infraction." He touched her knee and slowly slid her skirt up her thigh. "For a pretty woman."

Anya's face froze. She was a mere flinch away from throwing her drink at him, but she did have a sense of self-preservation. It was perhaps a millimeter thicker than her dangerous pride. She leaned forward. "Listen, bust--" She cut herself short, bobbed her curls and smiled in a way that had made saner and more sensible men quail. "Sir. You're a moderately attractive man, and in vastly different circumstances I'm sure I'd feel almost charitable about your interest." She removed his hand from her leg, placed it on his own. "But I have a boyfriend. A *man* friend. A big man, and he wouldn't be happy about this."

"But he never needs to know," he reassured her, a small crooked smile appearing. "Your infraction would be wiped off the books, and you would be spared the labor mines, and how could he not be happy to have you safe and well at home?"

'The--the labor mines?' The prefect's face didn't look quite so benign now.

"Drink up," he said.

---

Dawn lashed out with her stake and would have nearly caught the demon in the chest if he hadn't jumped back. As she whirled and tried her slayer side-kick on him, she had no time to process the details of her foe, but a blurred impression of Baja pullover, jeans, and headphones began to sink in
as she continued her attack, and gradually she became aware that instead of fighting her the demon was backing away and holding up his hands, yelling, "Whoa, hey! Easy, lady!"

Lady? What was she, forty? Dawn lifted her stake higher and glared at the demon, trying to determine his species from his green and thorny-looking face. She didn't recognize anything else about him weaponlike, like stingers or battle fins, and was beginning to suspect this might be one of the more harmless types of demon. Unless it was one of the ones that looked harmless but used their camouflage to win your trust until they were ready to eat your brains. Err on the side of caution, Buffy would have said.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Dawn challenged, eyes narrowing.

"Uh, Kethas." The demon waved a hand. "And I'm just hangin' out." A note of pathos couldn't be entirely ignored. Dawn's gaze focused behind him, piecing things together slowly. He'd been camping out in one of the containment cells. There was a pile of blankets and CDs and some canned food, and a backpack stuffed messily with clothes. She looked at him again, saw that he was wearing two earrings in one ear, three in another, several bracelets, and a pair of ancient sneakers. His hands were dirty.

"You're just a kid," she realized aloud. "Like me. That's...weird."

"I'm not like you," he pointed out a bit sulkily. "You're human." He didn't sound very impressed with this fact.

"And what are you?"

"Bracken." Pride touched his voice.

"Okay." Whatever. It meant nothing to her. "Do you eat brains?"

The kid faked a gagging sound. "No. Do you?"

"As if." Her brows curled together in disdain. "Gross." She studied him another moment, then slowly lowered her stake. She felt foolish continuing to hold it up, plus her hand was getting tired. Kethas shifted his weight from foot to foot, scratched his face, bumped his CD player against his thigh, all without looking quite at her. It was like being at a school dance and having some dorky guy ignore you. "Look," she said. "Nothing personal, but you should know that I'm kind of a demon slayer...apprentice."

"Yeah, right." Kethas snickered, stealing a skeptical glance.

"I am!" She lifted her chin with hauteur. "I could take you down if I wanted. But you begged for mercy, and I don't kill helpless creatures."

He looked insulted. "I didn't beg for mercy! And I'm not helpless, either. You're just a skinny human girl. I could knock you out cold."

"Oh yeah?" Dawn's eyes gleamed. "Bring it on."
When Buffy returned to the Initiative with her bedraggled ducklings in tow, she found Willow and Tara snuggling and whispering together on a sleeping bag, their clothes rumpled. They both sat up guiltily when they spotted her arrival.

"Hey," said Willow, getting to her feet. "Um, we were just--"

"Looking for a button," finished Tara, eyes going innocently wide for a moment before her lips curved.

"Hope you found it," Kerry said as she passed. She gave Marcos's shoulder a rude shove. "This chilito always has trouble." Marcos muttered something back at her under his breath, and they collapsed next to each other on some crates while Dor and Jason scavenged for food.

"Xander's stayed at the Magic Box," Buffy told them. "We shouldn't wait on him. I want to get on campus now, try to make contact with Giles." As Willow nodded readily, Buffy scanned the room, feeling her nerves and exasperation rise when she didn't see her sister. Great. First Anya, now Dawn. Again. "Where's Dawn? Has she wandered o--"

"Hey, everyone!" Dawn waved as she entered from a corridor, her other hand clutching the strap of a bedroll. She had a black eye and a cheerful grin, along with a big rip down the side of her shirt. Beside her shuffled a demon with blue pointies all over his face, headphones around his neck, and unlaced sneakers, carrying a knapsack and a bulging pillowcase. Buffy gaped.

"Dawn." She assumed her sister voice. Voice of doom. "Are you okay? Who is this?"

"I'm fine. This is Kethas. He's a Bracken demon." Dawn's smile faded and she cast her new pal a sympathetic puppy look. "His parents were killed by the Grauth and he's been hiding out in the tunnels. I told him he could stay with us."

Buffy cast a glance at Willow, who answered her unspoken question by saying, "Bracken are peaceful." She eyed Kethas dubiously. "As far as I know."

"He's really strong," Dawn said, the optimism of her face suggesting this should be a persuasive factor when adopting stray demons. "And he can pass for human." She turned back to Kethas excitedly. "Show them the thing with your neck!" To Buffy, she added: "It's so cool!"

Kethas ducked his head and scuffed his shoe against the floor. "Aw, it's kind of sore."

What the hell, Buffy thought, ire deflated by his floppy-haired adolescence. One more lost boy wouldn't strain their resources to max capacity. "Party tricks later," she said, and saw Dawn's face light up with an irrepressible pleasure, though she carefully didn't peep. "Willow and I are heading to the surface for a while. You and Tara are in charge here."


Kethas rolled his eyes. "You--"

"--aren't going to get away with this," Anya said as the prefect manhandled her through a door in
his office, into a smaller adjoining room with a cot. The protest came out melodramatically but she felt melodramatic. And vulnerable, and terrified. Besides, it was what they said in the movies and it was true, the bad guys never did get away with it. Someone would burst in to save the girl at the last moment, someone with big strong arms and a no-nonsense attitude. And usually a semi-automatic weapon.

But what if no one saved her? What if her only recourse was...vengeance?

That would suck.

"Look," she said, trying once again to find her reasonable tone. She knew she had one. "You don't want me. I'm really not that pretty compared to supermodels, and--and at certain times of the month I bloat." He tossed her down onto the cot, and she landed butt-first with a bounce, arms outstretched to balance herself. She would fight him, of course, if she couldn't talk her way out of this. The trouble was, she wouldn't win. He was looming over her now, unbuttoning his uniform, undoing his belt. Eyes level with his hips, Anya swallowed, a chill running down her body.

"Really, one demon type to another," she whispered up to him with imploring eyes and a last-ditch smile, "don't you think you could--"

Sooner than she'd expected, Anya found herself shoved out the office door, purse and coat in hand. Bemused, she took a few awkward steps down the hall and touched her disarranged hair. Glancing suspiciously from side to side, she determined no one in the police station was looking at her and, straightening her shoulders, sniffled, and left.

Her signum pinned to her chest.

In the Magic Box, she found Xander waiting. "What are you doing here?" she cried, feeling a bright flame of anger rise inside her, like an oil lamp turned up high when home is reached. "Just hanging around in the open--why not go outside and stand in the street and wave your arms and say, 'Come and get me, I'm a big stupid human! I have no signum! La la la!" Irrationally close to tears, she tried to push past him, but he caught her arms.

"Anya--"

"Stupid, stupid," she cried into his chest. "Where were you? I needed you."

"Anya! What happened?" She heard panic in his voice, felt the bruising strength of his fingers. Such a relief, all that strength, even if it wasn't hers.

"I was touched by a man with sweaty palms and bad breath. Because I'm a woman, Xander!" She glared at his befuddled face, accusing him with her own tear-stained one. "A weak, mortal woman in a skirt, which because I'm wearing instead of big mannish pants must mean I want the sex. But I don't. Except with you."

"Oh my god--did someone attack you?" A wild look flashed in Xander's eyes and he let her go, heading for the door. "Where is he?"

"No!" she cried, grabbing his arm. He stopped at her command, obedient and loyal as a dog. A good, sweet little doggie. It made her want to cry more, but for happiness and love of him. "He pawed me and threatened me--and then he didn't even want me!" Fresh outrage surged at the memory of her experience. "I told him I was a demon and all of a sudden I'm an untouchable! I hate men."

"Oh, thank god," he said and wrapped himself around her, pressed his cheek to her hair in that way
she liked.

"I want all our sons to be daughters," she told his fuzzy shirt sleeve. "But that won't work, because they'll just get screwed over by men. Unless they stay virgins. Or lesbians." She pulled back and gazed up at him seriously. "All our children must be lesbians, Xander."

"No problem," he said, stroking her hair. "I'll get right on that."

The Sunnydale campus was quiet and familiar in the dark. Buffy knew every secluded path that traced the grounds, every clump of shaggy bushes where a monster could hide, every arbor and tool shed, every ugly bronze statue to higher education. She and Willow gave wide berth to the dorms, whose lighted windows indicated wakeful inhabitants. It wasn't hard to guess who was living there now.

"Do you think there're any students left?" Willow asked softly, as they crept along the other side of the quad.

"Don't know." Don't you? Buffy wondered, but kept the words off her lips. Practice was making almost perfect.

After pausing behind some rhododendron to wait out a pair of strolling guards, they made it to the science building undiscovered and broke inside.

"This way," Willow said when they'd cleared the foyer, leading her down a hall and into a room with a high ceiling and tall windows that made Buffy nervous, like dozens of eyes that might spy their presence. Seeming to lack any such unease, Willow went immediately to a lab station and brought a computer to life. After scoping out the room, Buffy let herself drift closer and watch.

"What do you have to do?" she asked.

"It's kind of neat, actually." Willow typed as she spoke. "The school is part of a global student program that recreates early low-earth satellite communications. We can record a message for uplink and it'll be retransmitted to anyone on the network with a receiver. There's a few stations in England."

"So we record a message for Giles, and hope someone delivers it."

"Yeah." Willow turned away from the computer a moment, looking at Buffy with doubt in her face. "But you should know, this may not even work. The shield they have could prevent any transmissions from getting through."

Buffy frowned. "It's a magic shield, right? And this is, like, technology." She knew it wasn't that simple, but sometimes she didn't get magic at all. Its rules were complicated and obscure. It was like math. Stupid math.

"Yeah, but--oh!" Willow's face lit up, the way it did when her hundred-watt brain bulb went on inside. "Oh, oh, oh, I just had an idea!"
Will, if that idea had been a scream, they'd have heard it across town.

Willow grinned at her and for a moment everything felt perfectly right between them again. "If I can figure out a spell to boost our broadcast, we may have a better chance. It'd be like sending our message off with a magic bullet--we could punch a hole right through the shield."

That sounded like a plan all right, and what were they waiting for? Buffy raised her brows and waved a hand. "Make it so."

With a little oops-good-idea expression, Willow eagerly resumed work.

The brothel had been a small hotel only the week before. Not much conversion required, thought Spike. Girls and beds, that's all you needed for a modest start-up; and not necessarily girls, if it came to that, but he didn't see anything else on offer. They were all human, of all races. And all young. Some Dawn's age, the rest no older than thirty. Management had draped them around a hastily redecorated lobby, now filled with bar tables and quite a number of potted palms.

A suited human man with dazed, nervous eyes came forward at their entrance. "Welcome to the Sunnydale Square Inn, sirs," he said with the air of someone reciting from a script. "Now serving the finest in traditional Grauth cuisine and," he cleared his throat with a sickly expression, "and delicacies for other appetites." His smile was forced, his eyes glassy as he finished his spiel. "May I seat you at a table, or would you prefer a private room?"

There was no reason to feel appalled. Spike had been in a thousand places like this, usually to take advantage of the establishment's marginal legal status--you could get a shag and a snack in one-stop-shopping convenience, and they weren't likely to run complaining to the police if you left a girl low on juice. Still, it gave him a weird feeling to see the choicer female inhabitants of Sunnydale arrayed for purchase. Schoolteachers, shopgirls, secretaries, waitresses--he matched imaginary jobs to the women in the room, but one or two actually looked familiar, including a cat-eyed, fuschia-haired barista from the coffee shop down the street, who'd always flirted with him in a charmingly rude way. She'd been stripped of her nose ring and dressed in a frilly prom gown that clashed with her tattoos, and was seated next to a fat Grauth officer, his arm slung around her shoulders.

Something clenched in Spike's gut. After a moment he dredged up the reluctant recognition of his own anger. He hadn't known he could feel it on behalf of the people of Sunnydale, but apparently if you stuck around in one town long enough, you got a bit territorial. He should have left this damn place years ago. The Hellmouth bent you to its will, twisted you up like a pretzel or some kind of balloon animal for the kiddies to play with, and you'd think that the punchline would be pure evil, but there were other forces at work here.

_I am not a toy_, Spike thought distractedly, as he followed Sordicov to a table crowded with officers and women. _Not a tin soldier._


Hailed and welcomed, Spike sat and smiled thinly at their effusions. "Bring me a bottle," he said to
the human waitress. He was the only one meeting her eyes and ignoring her cleavage, and she managed a tremulous smile for him. As she left, another woman came up and took the empty chair next to Spike. She was dressed in a shimmering evening gown, but the name-tag pinned to its strap was a garish cartoon turkey used by a local family restaurant. Rosa, it said.

She was beautiful, and her warm smile surprised Spike, who cocked his head down attentively as she leaned close and whispered, "Traitor." She was still smiling as she drew back.

Stiffening, he realized she mistook him for human. He could only stare as she settled near him and picked up a drink. A makeshift stage had been constructed at one end of the lobby, which Spike only noticed as the lights dimmed and heads turned its way. He dragged his attention from Rosa, following the audience's collective gaze and responding to its hush. Unsure what to expect except the worst, it took him several moments to connect the subdued tinkling of a piano with the appearance of an older black woman at the microphone, who stood swaying gently in the circle of a spotlight.

"This day and age we're living in gives cause for apprehension," she sang, "with speed and new invention, and things like fourth dimension..."

He'd heard Billie sing this in thirty-eight, thirty-nine, in a Harlem dive he'd forgotten until now, as the lyrics brought it rushing back. The singer wasn't a patch on Billie, and the piano player was a grey-skinned demon with a slight cough, but nostalgia closed around him, the elements of the room coming together to evoke a different, better era. And as the woman sang like a tragedy, and the ice in people's glasses tinkled, and cigarette smoke unfurled across the room, he saw it for a moment all in the perfect clarity of black and white--spectacle and stage sets and cinema--and understood exactly why the Grauth had come. It was the same reason he'd taken such unlikely joy in the first few days of the invasion.

It was a fucking huge and beautiful crisis, a blood-thrilling adventure, an atmosphere for grand gestures and great risks, and with the music seeping through the air like the darkest wine, a sense of formless, dramatic urgency rose in Spike and spilled over in the nearest direction. He leaned close to Rosa, arm around the back of her chair. He could feel the tension of fright and dislike in her motionlessness, in how she kept her gaze fixed on the stage. "What say you and me have a little talk somewhere more private," he said softly into her ear. "I've got a proposition for you."

"You're going to what?"

"To the inaugural ball," Anya said.

Xander sat stunned at the magic shop table from which they'd launched a thousand daring campaigns--or at least several dozen foolhardy ones--and tried to make sense of her words. He loved her, and he knew she wasn't crazy. She was a practical, self-protective woman who kept her eye out for the main chance and didn't believe in stupid risks. So what the frelling hell was she telling him?

"You're going to dance with demons."

She gazed at him, eyes ever so slightly wider than usual, which meant she thought he was being
"Well, yes, Xander. A ball usually has dancing." Like that was the point.

"You just barely escaped being some demon soldier's afternoon sex snack, and now you want to go socialize with them." He kept thinking if he put things into simple, straightforward words, she'd recognize their wrongness.

"Actually, he was the prefect of police. Strictly speaking, I don't think that's a military position."

Xander wished he had a pair of small eyeglasses so that he could take them off and clean them. Lacking a better way to signify his utter lostness, he nodded. "Is it higher ranking?"

"I don't know." She frowned. "Why?"

"Because it's really going to matter," he said, voice rising, "when he pushes you into a coat closet and rapes you, don't you think, Anya?"

"No!" Anya said, with a strikingly hurt and angry expression. "I don't think it matters! How can you say such a thing? And if that's some of your ill-timed sarcasm, you can just stuff it, mister."

He clenched his jaw. "I don't want you going."

"Well, I don't think it's wise to turn down the invitation." She adjusted her shoulders against the chair, and the broody wrinkles in her brow and pouting lips were those of someone much older; he could see Anya at fifty, Anya at seventy, cranky about moving to Florida, wanting a bigger condo by the beach. "Besides," she said, "I won't be in any danger. Spike will be there."

"Thanks," he said. "That was the bitter frosting on the cake that I needed to make this moment complete. I'll feel so much better knowing that a collaborating vampire is looking after you when I'm hiding below in my tunnel."

"Oh, get over yourself," she said irritably, rising to retreat behind her cash register. He followed. "At least Spike has the sense to..." She broke off hesitantly, noticing his dangerous look.

"To what, Anya?"

Her face set hard. "To find high ground when the floods roll in."

"Oh, he's quite a survivor, all right. Like a rat from a sinking ship." His mouth tightened with the sore, endless hatred he never wanted to lose, because losing that piece of himself would mean the game. "You know what the funny thing is? He didn't even join their side. That I could have understood, at least. But the only side he's on is his own."

Anya shut her cash drawer with a rattling slam and twisted her key in it. "Take it from a girl with a thousand years of experience. Sometimes that's the only side there is."

The hotel room was small and plain, with an insipid watercolor over the bed whose hues matched the quilted coverlet too closely for coincidence. One lamp glowed on a small table, picking up the facets of a crystal decanter and a glass. There was a TV, but it was silent and black. Rosa moved
inside as he closed the door behind them, turned, and began sliding her dress off her shoulders. Her face gave nothing away.

"Now, now," Spike said, pushing the straps back up. "None of that."

Registering confusion, she crossed her arms high in front of herself, adopting by some instinct a burial pose Spike hadn't seen on corpses since the last century. "What do you want?"

"Information." Spike lit a cigarette for something to do, giving her time to assimilate this.

"Information," she repeated, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Yeah. Gossip, plans," he said a bit vaguely. "Like that."

"Plans?"

He grimaced. "This will go faster if you don't parrot everything I say."

A flash of anger hit her face and was quickly absorbed back into wary expressionlessness. "I don't know anything," she said, playing it defiantly cool, even though she couldn't have any way of knowing what he was asking for or why.

"Not yet you don't." He dropped into a nearby chair, bringing them eye to eye. "But you might learn a lot, working in a place like this." He thumbed his cigarette suggestively into his mouth and watched her flinch. She had a smart edge to her that he liked. That, and hatred.

"Why should I help you?" she challenged, and Spike's unbeating heart soared a bit higher. It was like something out of a movie. It was bloody marvelous. He unleashed a slow smile.

"Because you'd be hurting them, ducks."

It clicked for her. He could see it in her widening eyes. "You're--you're a spy." But doubt and good sense regained hold almost at once and she drew on a sneer. "You're human. They can't possibly trust you."

Spike vamped out and the woman screamed and scrambled away; he swore and leapt across the bed, grabbing at her, muffling her cries. "Shut up," he snarled in exasperation. She was limp in his arms, weeping and red. "Oh for crying out--" He lowered her to the bed, one hand still clasped over her mouth. "Stop bawling. Look, peek-a-boo, now you see it, now you don't." He unfaced himself and gave her his most Williamy regard, trying to reassure her. Quiet her. When she did calm at last, he removed his hand.

"What are you?" she asked, and he could tell she hadn't expected anything new. She'd gotten used to one race of demons, thought she'd mastered herself, maybe, but now he'd shown her there was more to fear.

"Vampire," he informed her matter of factly. "Undead, demonically animated. Lot of us about in Sunnydale. You're lucky you never noticed. 'S usually the last thing you see."

Her eyes welled with fresh tears. "I wanted to move to Pasadena. My mother lives there. I told Derek, it's close to L.A., and they have their own symphony...."

Spike sighed and climbed off her, hoping she'd pull herself together. "Wouldn't waste too much time on regret. Vampires everywhere." Of course, the Grauth probably weren't there, and she could have avoided servitude in a demon brothel if Derek had liked classical music better, but the truth
wouldn't set her free, so what was the point? "Besides, fate's a tricky bitch. Got us all in its teeth, drags it where it wants us to go, whether we like it or not." He poured a glass of what smelled like rum and handed it to her. "Drink this."

She sat up shakily and drank, then wiped her hand across her mouth. She was staring at him, gaze crawling over his face as if she were trying to locate the seams of his mask. When her eyes began to gloss over sightlessly, he snapped his fingers and she came back with a start.

"I'm on your side," he reminded her.

"My side."

"Yeah. Side of good and righteousness and, er, humanity. More or less," he amended, feeling faintly ridiculous and glad none of the Scooby team could him fumbling his lines. In his fired-up imagination, he had a big-screen, surround-sound movie playing glorious stuff, where he could speechify inspiring at the tip of a hat. What came out instead was halting, lame, and inelegant. Playing the role of hero didn't come easy, especially when you'd the last century honing your cynicism. But that's why they made method acting.

"More or less?"

"Here. I said to stop that." He glared at her and, strangely, she seemed to relax a little.

"So you're recruiting me."

"Right, that's it." Finally, he thought in relief. Progress.

Her steely gaze drilled into his. "You want me to whore my body to demons, collect what information I can, and pass it on to you."

Spike raised his eyebrows. She seemed to have a need to spell out the obvious. "Well, yeah."

Leaning against the headboard, Rosa smiled coldly at him, tears completely dry. "You've got a deal."

Buffy paced the lab. She hated being the watcher, having nothing to do while someone else worked. It made her a testy and unfun Buffy, and she knew that, but the knowledge didn't help. Trying to squeeze her impatience in was like trying to squeeze toothpaste back into a tube. "How much longer?" she asked for the umpteenth time. Umpteen. How many umps was that, anyway?

"As long as it takes me to figure out this spell, multiplied by the number of times you ask that question." He voice lowered to a mutter. "In dog years." It sounded like Willow was getting testy too, but Buffy couldn't summon up a worthy reproof. She wasn't sure she fully trusted Willow again after learning the enormity of the secret she'd kept, but the worst sting of anger was fading. Besides, now was no time to pick fights.

"Okay, I think I've got it. Get ready for some fusion-powered mojo."

Buffy hovered. "Fusion? Like nuclear? Willow--"
"No." Willow tapped speedily on the keyboard. "Fusion like cyberpunk meets ancient magics, with a dash of pap...ri...ka..."

"Huh?"

"What?" Willow returned absently, so absorbed she didn't even glance up from the computer screen. She flickered from window to window, resizing and dragging them, cutting and pasting text so fast that Buffy couldn't track a thing. "All right, let's get cooking."

Tap, tap, tap went her fingers.

There was a long, stretching minute of silence in which Buffy's tension ratcheted up notch after painful notch. "Do you need me to help with the spell?" she asked, wondering when it would begin.

"Nope. It's all done. I typed it into the computer. Cool, huh?"

"Wow," Buffy said with grudging interest, peering at the screen. "Are the powers logged on?"

"Guess we'll find out." Willow hit the enter key and the computer flashed a brilliant green, running fluidly with incomprehensible numbers and symbols like those ads for The Matrix, before going completely black. Sparks shot out of the monitor and showered them, and Buffy yelped and dragged Willow away, both of them beating at their clothes.

"Is that success or failure?" Buffy wondered aloud, an arm in front of her face to bat away the smoke that was quickly filling the air. She coughed.

"I'm not sure, but I think the computer's toast." They exited the lab. "We'll know it worked if Giles arrives," Willow said once they were outside in the corridor.

If, not when. Buffy felt that one word sink like a stone in her gut, drowning her optimism. "Great. More waiting."

"That's all I could do for months, is wait."

Buffy turned to Willow in disbelief at the quietly spoken words. Her friend's face was unhappy and vulnerable, but it was also something else. She didn't know quite what, but she knew it was there, self-satisfaction or self-pity, some selfie part of Willow that didn't regret at all what she'd done. She knew it was there because it was in her too, whenever she did something no one else agreed with, when she took the hard road against their reproachful looks. She'd paid over and over again for doing what was necessary; she'd suffered guilt, but deep down she'd always kept that little voice that said: I had to do it--I know I was right--they don't understand.

She could hear Willow's little voice, and it angered her.

"All you could do?" she burst out. "No. You could have told us, Willow. You could have maybe said something about the prophecy, instead of lying to our faces. You could have been a team player, instead of taking the entire weight of the world on your shoulders. I thought we were past all that." She'd been saving this up, and the vent was inevitable.

"God, you still don't get it, do you?" Willow's face tightened and seemed to glow more brightly in the dark hallway. "I knew what I wasn't supposed to know, Buffy. That was the only thing--the only thing--that changed our fate. Without the visions, I'd have translated the prophecy and we'd all be dead. It was supposed to be. And I unmade that. I did. You couldn't have. You'd have had to fight. There'd have been no stopping you. And that's what kills you, isn't it. That it was me,
and not you. That I did something you couldn't."

Under that accusing glare, Buffy didn't back down, but her hands clenched by her sides. That's what kills you, she'd said, all unheeding of the irony. Or not. Not all Willow's layers were sweet now. There was a sharp bite to that cake, like bitter fruit. But the flavor wasn't so different from her own.

"Maybe you're right," she said all at once. Willow blinked, taken aback. "But I don't know how to take you being right when I feel so betrayed."

"Oh, Buffy." Willow's face opened to her as easily and suddenly as an unstuck door, full of love and yearning. "I never meant that. Never. It was for you and Xander and Tara and Dawn, and it was hard, really hard, every day."

And then she was crying and Buffy was crying and they were puddling in each other's arms like a couple of girls, which they were, so that was okay, wasn't it. She agreed with herself, yes, it was, and just at the moment she was getting in touch with her inner Oprah, a pair of Grauth guards burst through the doors at the end of the hall.

"Patete," Willow yelled and Buffy thought, pate? But apparently it was Harry Potter hoodoo for 'please open a big gaping hole in the floor', which was what happened, leaving them on one side and the guards on the other, at least until they skidded over the edge. Sweet. But the doors crashed open again, and those guns had range, so--

"Come on!" Buffy said, pulling Willow along with her. Willow didn't need much pulling. She was hoofing it fast in her muddy red sneakers and it was only when she yanked open a door marked 'Basement' that Buffy remembered this could be considered the other woman's home turf. She hadn't picked up much of the subterranean layout while she was enrolled, and hadn't been back often since she left. She followed Willow down the narrow stairs and into a maze of tunnels. For a moment it did look familiar, before she realized it merely looked like all the other tunnels she'd traversed since moving Hellmouthward.

"I wonder if this hooks up to the Initiative," Buffy said as they ran.

"Don't think so. It runs all the way across campus--ends near the stadium. We'll have to work our way back--around."

"Let's hope there isn't a night game scheduled."

"You know," Willow huffed, "with the ducking and the fleeing and all, it really makes me wish I'd appreciated those twelve years of gym more."

"Really?" Buffy said skeptically.

"Oh hell, no."

The vast Sunnydale City Hall had been built in the early twenties, a pinnacle of the Beaux-Arts style, designed at the height of the City Beautiful movement. A mysterious fire in the late nineties
had forced its closure, and its inhabitants had been relocated to lesser buildings. It had reopened only last year, its domes and towers burnished to a white shine, its marble walls stripped free of scaffolding, except in the far west corner, where the old mayoral offices still underwent costly reconstruction.

All of this Anya could read on the plaque in the grand foyer, which she did as she was forced to idle there for an escort. It was an impressive building. Walking up the street on arrival, she'd had a grand view--lanterns lit, fountains splashing, palms waving. One thing that could be said about evil overlords, they always had extravagant taste. Inside, it was all wrought-iron balustrades and ornate scrollwork and grained white oak. The plaque told her these details too. Helpful, and she would have taken notes, but she didn't need to. She'd visited the building countless times before, showing Xander around after zoning meetings. If she ever had a real home someday she wanted it decorated just like this. But without a plaque. That would be unnecessary.

Women in formal evening gowns swept by her, escorted on the arms of officers. Most were Grauth, but some were human, or human looking. Anya stood with her back to the wall, watching the grand parade, unsure how she felt about it. Resentment and mild envy mingled together in her breast; she didn't know how a 'real' human woman would feel about being here (she used irony quotes in her own head), on the outside looking in, but to her it felt like disenfranchisement. She'd taken great pains to conform to the world, making herself a secure place in it. And now this. It was one good reason to fight the Grauth, if she'd needed one. The pleasure she'd felt earlier in the day while shopping had evaporated. She wanted the familiar face of American imperialism back, the trade routes reestablished, the trucks running on time, carrying in boxes of Puffs tissues with lotion and register tape and the new Kiwi Coke, and all the other things she loved.

Lifting one gloved hand, she fidgeted with her signum.

"Miss Jenkins, you are a picture." Anya straightened, finding Colonel Sordicov at her side, his monocle screwed in place as he looked her up and down. He held out his arm, and she linked her own through it, resting her fingertips on his cuff.

"Where's Spike?" she asked, getting a bit nervy as they approached the main hall. She craned her neck, searching the crowd for him.

"Who'd you say, my dear?"

"Spike. William."

"Oh. Aurelius. He'll be along. Fellow never stops gadding about. Restless chap."

"Well, vampires."

"Quite so."

They crossed the threshold and Anya caught her breath, lifted one hand to her pearls. Before, the great hall had merely been a showcase for dusty boring art, its two curving stairs flanking a common area of benches, set under a high domed roof. Now its expanse was renewed, hung with tapestries and lit up with hundreds of tiny lanterns. In one corner a small orchestra played a waltz, while along the room's edges ran bars and hors d'oeuvre tables and couches; tall potted palms artfully created nooks where women fanned themselves and spied on the dancers swirling on the center floor.

It was too beautiful, a vision of a world preserved in a bubble of privilege, and Anya felt her certainties tilt and slide away again. She wanted life to be like this all the time. No fighting, no
quests for slayers and their foolishly loyal friends, but an endless bounty for everyone, with laughter and mild intoxicants. If she could have all this and register tape too, life could get no better.

Oh, shove your starry-eyed idealism where the sun don't shine, Anya thought, disgusted with herself and angry at that disgust, and guilty and regretful and rather excited by the pretty ice carving of a swan surrounded by punch cups, and how the hell did humans put up with all these emotions? Why weren't they all on prescription medications?

She let Sordicov guide her down the steps, around the dancers and to a bar, where he procured her a glass of champagne. It would have been better if Xander had been with her to enjoy this and—if she admitted it to herself—keep her grounded, but he couldn't come, and if he had, he just would have sulked.

"Would you care to dance?" Sordicov asked with genteel attention, and she set down her glass.

"You won't get the wrong idea, will you? Because I have a boyfriend." She gave him a charming smile to take any sting from her words, and he bowed to her.

"Not at all. Your company tonight is its own reward."

Hoping that meant what she thought it meant, she took his arm and let him lead her onto the dance floor. He was light on his feet, and though she hadn't danced in this manner for over a century, it all came back to her, along with the memory of other men and other dances.

"You waltz very well," she told her companion.

"As do you."

"I used to dance a lot," she confided. "I was a vengeance demon, once upon a time. Balls are a great feeding ground for intrigue and revenge. Sometimes you could make your monthly quota in a single night if you played your cards right."

Sordicov seemed to grow slightly distant and a pronounced politeness entered his tone. "How unusual. Aurelius didn't mention that you were...in the arts."

"Oh, yes. For a thousand years. But I reverted to human form after a certain incident--it's not really important--and I've been stuck with it ever since."

"Ah." Sordicov's face relaxed into a smile. "And a beautiful form it is."

The music briefly stopped and couples broke apart, some leaving the floor, some clapping. In another moment, the orchestra eased into the opening strains of a new song and she turned and there was Spike in officer's evening wear, hair smoothed back, face set in a sardonic smile. He took her hand and bowed correctly over it. "May I have this dance?"

Anya looked to Sordicov, but he'd already slipped away and she was left alone with Spike, who drew her seamlessly into the steps and sway of enforced intimacy. "You look fetching tonight," he said, and if a leer had sound, that sound was his voice, a honeyed mocking drawl that made her cheeks burn, made her want to find ways to dig back at him.

"So do you. It must be hard, always being the prettiest one in the room."

He chuckled, continuing to lead her gently between the dancing couples and further onto the floor. A chandelier of electric candles twinkled overhead. "Where's the carpenter? Can't believe he'd let
you come out and consort with the likes of us."

"Is that what you are now? Part of an us?"

Not immediately answering her, he looked sideways into the crowd and she followed his eyes, watching the glissade of bodies to soothing music. Women in gold satin and red velvet, men in dress black with bits of white shirt and cuff showing. Jewels and fitted shoes and stoles.

"Every human in this room wants to be somewhere else," Anya said seriously, drawing his attention again.

He gazed down at her, unreadable as one of Giles's thicker books. "Only humans? Is that how it is now?"

"Don't try to pull demon solidarity with me." Her voice was earnest. "This is a war and you'd better be on the right side, Spike."

That surprised him a little; she could see it in his excessively handsome face. Then he smiled, not entirely pleasantly. "Oh, I'm always on the right side. Just not always the side of right. Still, it's worked out so far." His expression shifted to one more pathetic and masculine, lined with hope. "How's Buffy? She say anything about me?"

Anya whacked his shoulder with her closed fan, making him jump, eyes wider. "Listen up. You get messenger service when I'm sure you can be trusted."

"I can be!" He glanced around, dropped his voice. "I'm on the inside, aren't I? Got my eyes and ears open. Lots of interesting things going on."

Intrigued despite herself, she pressed closer. His hips moved nicely. Sway, step, sway. "Like what?"

"Er, like...raids and killings, that sort of thing."

She turned a world of scorn on him, cutting him with her eyes. "You don't know anything. I bet all you've been doing is drinking and carousing."

"Best way to learn stuff," he retorted defensively, whirling her with extra force.

Anya issued a disdainful huh. "Spike, you're about as good a spy as I am a--an astronaut."

His blue eyes looked wounded, irritated. "Give me a chance. I've barely gotten started."

Doubtfully, she considered him. "Do you really think you can pull it off? You're not exactly Mister Smooth Operator."

Instead of making some easy crack, he merely frowned without answering, as if giving her question careful weight and measure. The music stopped and they released, leaving the dance floor together as it began again, Spike's hand on her back to guide her. They brushed past good-humored officers raising glasses in toast, past women in cliques with heads together, giggling. The demon women wore more modest dresses than their human counterparts, with long sleeves and heavy jewelry, their hair piled high. Anya could see them snubbing the humans with catty glances and smirks. It was all so familiar, history repeating itself with new players. She didn't know whether to feel heartened at how the wheel kept turning, or depressed.

"It's funny, isn't it?" she said to Spike, gazing out across the crowd as he handed her another glass
of champagne.

His own glass held blood, and he met her old eyes and nodded once, knowing exactly what she meant. The brittle cheer, the make-up like greasepaint, the brilliant light within darkness. Life.

"It is that." He paused broodingly. "You notice they have a thing for potted palms?"

Schoolrooms vary from country to country, with different architecture and different budgets. In the Space Sciences department of a certain hallowed British university, there were over a dozen labs, some stocked with expensive up-to-the-minute equipment, others not so much. Lab Ten was a shabby room despite its ancient pedigree, but made up for it with a million-dollar view of a meandering river, and a grassy quad filled with sunlight and students.

Inside, the lights were off, the lab empty. The equipment here was jury-rigged and duct-taped, most of it downright old-fashioned. But it worked, even when no one was around to watch it, and right now a battered dot-matrix printer was chugging away, slowly unscrolling line after line of text from a satellite passing overhead.

Few messages that came across the student satellite--named Baby--could be called important. Many were simply casual greetings exchanged from continent to continent, cookie recipes, or transcripts of Monty Python skits. A few were reports of weather data and technical readings, and these went into a special file.

The man who entered the lab wasn't expecting anything, and when he noticed a message had arrived he tore it from the printer and set it on the counter, placing his coffee mug on top of it. It was an unremarkable event and just one of a heavy sheaf of messages, anyway. Nothing that ever came down the wire was urgent.

"Hello, Baby," he said as he sat down at the computer, cracking his fingers like a piano-player. The screen saver, a revolving satellite, dissolved into a palimpsest of busy windows. "What have you got for me today?"

Under his coffee cup, now laced with a spill of coffee, the print-out sat waiting. Attention: Rupert Giles it began.

End

Chapter End Notes
Well, the unusual length of time it took to write this freaking thing certainly doesn't reflect any particularly groundbreaking accomplishment in the results, but it's done. Much thanks to people's feedback. I won't say it's the only thing that kept me going, because I'm a writer not an extortionist, but it is nice to get postcards from the world once in a while, reminding me there is an audience for this.

The title is from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and is a complicated sort of analogy that I'm not going to try and explain because I kept having to remind *myself* what the hell it was, but it's the gist behind the conversation between Spike and Anya in the ballroom scene, i.e., about spying. If you can figure it out, you get a cookie. Assuming you have any in your house.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
The little girl walked down the street holding her mother's hand. She wore a red coat over her dress, white tights with black patent-leather shoes, and a ribbon in her hair. Her mother was holding her hand too tightly and walking too fast, but she'd complained already and her mom hadn't listened. She thought her mom might be scared, and though she couldn't put words to it, the girl had caught this fear like a persistent cold. She'd had it for days, and it was worse whenever they went outside. She used to go out with her mom, to the playground and the zoo. It used to be sunny. Now it was always dark, and when she asked why, no one would tell her. Now when they went outside it was only to get food, and then they returned quickly home.

Daddy went to work in the dark, and stayed away for a long time, and was quiet when he came back. The house was full of whispers in other rooms, and her favorite cartoons weren't on. She didn't go to kindergarten anymore and had to play all alone in her house. She found new ways to play with her toys, but going outside was better.

"It's the funny men, mommy," she said, pointing as she spotted them. They were approaching on the sidewalk in their long coats, carrying guns. She knew what guns were. They were toys.

"Don't point, Candace." Her mother drew her to one side, closer to the shops. Her voice was low and sharp, like when she was upset, but Candace didn't want to hear that.

She waved at the funny men, who looked down at her as they passed. "They have faces like grandpa," she said, though that wasn't exactly right. "Are they really old?"

"I don't know, honey."

Candace's mother, flustered with nerves, dredged up a smile for the pretty blonde woman who crossed their path, whose eyes rested so gently and seriously on Candace that she might have been thinking of some other little girl. They did a sidestepping pas de deux, trying to make way for each other, then moved on separately, Candace dragging her feet a little as she looked back over her shoulder.

Buffy Summers walked freely through the streets of Sunnydale with her black-market signum pinned to her blouse. No one stopped her or even particularly noticed her and though she didn't feel safe exactly, she didn't feel in any immediate danger. It was the strangest thing in a long life of strangeness, being out for a stroll downtown and passing demons and vampires who brushed shoulders with human beings as if it were all perfectly normal. Her two worlds had collided at last. It was like a waking dream experienced in emotional slow-motion. None of the monsters attacked her. She'd thought there might be a chance someone, one of the vamps maybe, would recognize her as the slayer. But it seemed her face wasn't as well-known to them as she'd feared. Maybe it was just her name.

The invaders were tearing down and rebuilding the town, as if it were all just stage sets they didn't like. As she turned from Elm Street onto Main Street, the construction became more prevalent. The world still swam by in that dreamlike state, stretching like taffy. Two vampires walking arm in arm laughed and looked her way as she passed, and beyond them down the street a theater marquee was being reworded by a man on a ladder to advertise The Maltese Falcon. Demons criss-crossed a road free of any cars, shopping bags swinging in their hands. Lights had been hung on the trees and
shop windows were brilliantly lit against the endless night, their doors opening and closing to release the scent of fresh-baked bread and Italian food.

Did the Grauth have a taste for pasta primavera? Were they the ones patronizing the busy liquor store and the tiny children's bookshop down the block? It was madness, the world tilting into a vast sea of wrong, and for a moment Buffy couldn't tell, looking at the few neutral human faces that floated by, if she was the only one who felt the enormity of it all.

Somewhere a woman laughed, shrilly enough to break into her thoughts, and Buffy swallowed and moved out of the way of a passing guard patrol, ducking her head to the side casually and pretending to windowshop. When they'd walked by, she resumed her steady pace toward the center of town. She'd had a view from rooftops and from the window of the Magic Box, but this was the first time she'd approached it from the street. It was ground zero for the occupation, thick with suited Grauth filing in and out of office buildings, putting whatever infernal bureaucracy they'd brought with them into effect. The web of plazas and quirky merchant alleys that passed for a historical district had been colorfully restitched with tents, booths, and strands of lights into a bazaar of the bizarre.

It would have been almost appealing except, of course, for being evil.

Buffy wound her way through the increasingly dense crowd until she reached the courtyard she was looking for. In its center was a marble fountain spraying arcs of water, colored pink by tiny spotlights; red Spanish tiles delineated the ground under its tables. On her guard, she scanned the scattered knots of coffee-drinkers, gaze finally alighting on a demon sitting alone. He met her eyes for a moment before glancing away. She ordered a cappuccino and carried it to his table, sat down. He regarded her warily.

"A nod's as good as a wink to a blind bat," Buffy said.

"What frees the prisoner in his lonely cell, chained within the bondage of rude walls, far from the owl of Thebes?" murmured the demon.

She stared back at him, mind blank. "Uh...the fish flies at midnight? Oh, never mind. You're the friend of Anya's?"

The demon, a furry hunch-shouldered creature with saucer-sized yellow eyes, nodded rather mournfully. "I am Omo. A modest purveyor of imports and certain rare spices--"

"That's great," Buffy broke in. "But I need you to purvey something else." She tapped her chest, drawing his big blinking eyes that way. "More signums. Nine of them."

"Signa," said Omo.

"What?"

"The plural of signum is 'signa.'"

Raising her brows, Buffy asked, "Okay, you're a killer spelling bee. Do I look like I came here for a lesson?"

Omo hunched down further and sighed hissily over his espresso. Spidery fingers with black nails tapped the white china. "It's impossible to get so many signa--it was difficult enough to get even the one."

"Hey, I do six impossible things before breakfast. You'd be surprised what you can accomplish, if
"Price is not the issue. Fur is the issue. I prize my fur, Slayer. And I don't intend to see it skinned and hanging on General Nilec's wall."

Whose wall? Buffy wondered, before dismissing the question. The demon's obstinacy was making her anxious. She was used to being the can-do girl, and she hated returning to Willow and the others having failed at this. "Can you get any signums? ...na?"

"Maybe. Maybe one or two. I will try." A forked red tongue flicked out over lips and chin. "But it will cost you."

She braced herself with a wince, thinking of her nearly emptied bank account and how unlikely it was that she could even access her funds, what with a demon occupation and all. "Do you take Visa?"

Omo laughed soundlessly. Or maybe just had a spasm. "Your human currency is worthless. However, the market is far more flexible now. Guns, blood, nathra horn--I will leave a list with Anya. You procure what you can."

It seemed to Buffy that there was something to protest in this arrangement, even if she couldn't put her finger on it, but as she was forming her lips into a question, gunshots rang out. She leapt to her feet, froze, then sat back down again when she realized she was the only one standing. Around her the patrons of the cafe sat watching, immobile and silent, as a man staggered down the street, tie dangling from his half-bent body, shirt-tail untucked. He held a pistol loosely in his hand; red bloodstains had erupted on his white shirt. Behind him, a Grauth guard approached sedately, raising his weapon and spraying a few more shots into the man's back, sending him collapsing to the ground.

Her stomach twisting into a knot of fire, Buffy forced herself to remain seated while the guards cleared their victim out of pedestrian traffic, dragging him off the road to drop him face-down in the gutter.

"What do you think?" said a voice from a nearby table. Buffy looked over, saw a vampire in a lime-green polo shirt frowning at his brunch partner.

"We could ask," said the lady vampire. "I mean, it's perfectly good blood. Why throw away lemons when you can make lemonade?"

Subdued pools of light gleamed off the long, glossy meeting table, cast by a row of lamps which stretched down its middle. The lamps were of discreet height, with black shades, and the small circular glows that outlined them, even added together, were not enough to penetrate the room's surrounding shadows. At each place on the table sat a sheaf of loose-leaf notepaper, a fountain pen in pen-stand, a pitcher of water, and a glass. The pen-stands were embossed with the sigil of the Imperial State of Grauth, a design replicated in the wall banner that hung at the end of the room, behind the chair of General Nilec.
He looked over his staff, mottled face closed up tight as a purse, horns dipped meditatively as he listened to the report being made.

"...and recruitment is up by ten percent this week," said Liyoge. "Most volunteers come to us from the demon communities, but we're attracting a respectable showing of humans as well."

"Numbers."

"Ten percent, sir, as per your quota restrictions." Liyoge stretched back in his chair and twirled his pen with careless, fluid motions. Aristocrats, thought Nilec with disapproval. Impossible to escape the aristos. They bred in the ranks, soft and plentiful as Earth pigeons, cooing endlessly with their gracious tongues. "We've refined our selection process," he went on. "So far it appears that members of the civil service best match our requirements--particularly those previously employed by the Department of Motor Vehicles. We've also tapped local HMOs."

"In what capacity are they serving?" another officer asked.

"As trusties," Liyoge replied, turning slightly in his chair. "They hold minor positions of administrative power, nothing more, working under the guidance of our own people. As our strategic analysts predicted, it soothes the populace having other humans to deal with."

Nilec grunted, drawing Liyoge's glance. The colonel correctly read this as a signal that his report was at an end, and lit a cigar as punctuation.

"Operations," said Nilec, fastening his gaze on another of his staff.

"Sir." The man rose and walked over to the bare wall behind him. At a gesture, the warlock on hand called up a transparent full-color map of Sunnydale, projected against the marble. The chief of operations ran over the map lines with a pointer as he spoke. "We've sectored the city into seven distinct territories, each under the direction of a local field warden. Checkpoints have been established between all areas. Our containment camps are based here, along the edge of town. All undesirables--other than those we've eliminated--have been lodged there. The general population is being gradually relocated to centralized living communities here, here, and here." He pointed to splotches on the map that were shaded yellow.

"Ghettos," said Liyoge, rolling the edge of his cigar across an ashtray.

"Yes," said the ops chief. "We discovered areas of what they call 'subsidized low-cost housing' which were admirably suited to our needs." He returned to his seat, the map winking out behind him. "In general, the humans are compliant and easily maneuvered, but there remain pockets of rebellion."

"Measures?" asked Nilec, steepling his fingers and trying to determine if he needed another manicure just yet. One must keep up with the aristos, at least in appearances.

"Special Forces is taking care of the problem, sir." At those words, every officer's gaze turned down the table, directed with respect toward the head of the Special Forces branch.

Nilec frowned at this collective deference. He himself felt no special fear or respect for the man, and why should he? A subordinate doing his job like any other, that's all he was, with no secret powers or distinction other than the chance fortunes of birth. Nilec didn't credit the rumors that had grown around him like an obscuring mist.

Besides, he was half-human. And Nilec had his reservations about that.
"Colonel Naziren, report."

Naziren raised his head slowly as if from sleep and blinked. His body shifted a half-beat later, rousing itself to lazy attention, and he focused down the long table on Nilec, whose answering scowl deepened. The unnaturally smooth planes of Naziren's face showed no emotion and his dark humanish hair--black as his uniform--flopped in his eyes with an insouciance that goaded Nilec, who'd never found a regulation against it in the dress codes.

"Sir," said Naziren. "We've cleared out three rebel nests in the last week. The remnants of the human army have been scattered and cut off from one another. Our best intelligence suggests they've gone underground, into the tunnel system."

"They should have never gotten so far," Nilec said critically.

"They'll be rooted out, sir."

"By you."

Naziren didn't smile, but something in his face shifted. He was holding a round crystal and he turned it in his hand slowly, contemplatively. "It's not the job of Special Forces to chase tunnel rats. Sir. We leave that to the bullet squads." He was careful not to accept the responsibility Nilec assigned. He was too careful by far.

"The men are having a tough time in the tunnels," said the ops chief with a grimace. "Human sewage."

LIyoge's lips twitched. "A uniquely revolting smell, I understand."

"They'd better get over that, hadn't they?" Nilec said, his voice laced with ice.

"Well, it's the fumes, sir." The ops chief looked apologetic. "They act as a kind of...poison gas. So to speak." He cleared his throat and adjusted the documents in front of him. "We understand there are human military devices called 'gas masks.' We're looking into that."

With one last disgusted glare at his ops chief, Nilec returned his sights on Naziren. "Do you have anything more for us, Colonel?"

"Yes, sir. The slayer."

A sudden silence rippled through the room, like a breeze from an unexpected direction. Heads up and down the table turned, shoulders stiffened.

"What about her?" Nilec said impatiently. "She's dead."

"No, sir. It would seem that she is not." Naziren rotated the crystal in his hand, irritating Nilec inch by inch closer to a rebuke. "I've made it a priority to find her and eliminate her...with your approval, of course, sir." He glanced up from under thick lashes, something almost mocking in his gaze.

"Do it. And do it fast, Colonel. A slayer on the loose has not been factored into our plans." Then, thinking his words might suggest a weakness of strategy, he narrowed his gaze and cast the spotlight back on the other man. "You have a contingency plan for finding her, of course." He took pleasure laying emphasis on the last two words.

"Never fear, sir." Naziren's darkly hooded eyes held his. "I know just where to start."
Spike looked around his office, captivated more by the novelty than the decor. But the decor wasn't to be sneered at. He had a shiny desk and a comfy chair and one of those damn potted palms. Even had a picture on the wall of old sailing ships, which looked to have been painted around the time he’d once breathed. Someone had done their homework. The wet-bar was nice too, stocked with a few dozen different bottles, all in a lovely range of colors. Everything was so cozy and expensive, he couldn't find a single fault with any of it. It made him suspicious.

"Raus," he yelled, circling behind his desk to take a seat.

His aide came in hurriedly through the open door, straightening his tunic. "Sir?"

He put his boots up on the desk that was mercifully bare of such things as paperwork, which did not befit a gentleman vampire, and which would have bored him silly. "What's on the agenda for today?"

"The agenda, sir?" Raus's eyes flickered with an indefinable response and he hesitated as if stalling or thinking too much, both of which Spike found inappropriate in minions. "Let's see." He consulted a small leather book, finger tracing out appointments. "You have a meeting coming up to troubleshoot current data gathering initiatives, and after that, ah, an orientation to acquaint you with Grauth philosophy and legal principles--"

"That sounds dull," Spike said, cutting him off. "What do you do for fun around here?"

"Well, sir, I'm not sure if there's anything especially urgent requiring attention."

"Not what I asked." Spike's voice was exaggeratedly patient. "What's this organization for?"

Raus's expression said this he could answer. "The Special Forces branch is in charge of difficult or sensitive operations--intelligence gathering, secret missions, interrogation. We do whatever's called for that the other branches can't do."

"Sort of MI5 meets the Avengers, that right?"

"As you say, sir," Raus replied, obviously deciding this was a safe answer even if he didn't understand the references.

"Then again," Spike mused, "could be more like the Gestapo." He kept his speculative gaze fixed on his aide.

"Sir?"

Never mind, thought Spike, dragging his boots off the desk and standing. "I think it's about time I took a look round the castle, got the lay of the land." He strode from his office past Raus, who hurried after him, dogging Spike's heels and making a nuisance of himself.

"Sir, I'm not sure--we really ought to--the meetings are very--"

Yammer, yammer, yammer. Spike tuned him out as he wandered the halls of the building that Special Forces had appropriated for its headquarters. It had the shabby pedigree of office buildings from the twenties and thirties. Lots of old molding and pillars and transoms above the frosted
doors, with modernization efforts consisting of little more than waxy floor tile and low-hanging fluorescent lights, half of which blinked erratically or didn't work at all.

"What have we here," he said, stopping in front of a random door on which the Grauth seal now hung.

Raus tugged his sleeve. "Sir, I don't think--" His words dried up as Spike glanced down with pointed attention at where his aide's fingers rested on his tunic. Raus removed his hand at once, and Spike's low growl ceased. Nothing more was said as Spike opened the door and strolled inside. It was a small set of offices, bare of anything but three wooden chairs, a hat-stand, and its two occupants.

"Well, this looks cozy."

The two men inside looked up in startlement at Spike's arrival. One, a Grauth in uniform who'd been interrupted as he jotted into a notebook resting on his thigh, rose to his feet.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Then his gaze dropped from Spike's very non-Grauth face to the insignia on his jacket. The officer, a weedy lieutenant, backpedaled hastily, his arrogance wiped away. "Sir, my apologies, sir."

But Spike ignored him, eyes riveted to the man in the other chair. "Willy," he drawled. "Fancy meeting you here."

Willy's eyes shifted from left to right, a nervous rictus of a smile stretching his mouth out of shape, along with the thin mustache that had crawled onto his upper lip and died. He had a grey patchiness to his face that looked familiar, but Spike couldn't quite place it. "Hey, Spike. Wow, look at you. Quite the uniform." He cracked a tiny laugh.

"Yeah, I'm a sharp-dressed man these days." Spike took in the details of the scene and did some simple math, his interest catching like a pick-lock in tumblers. "And you're not doing so bad yourself, I see." The human's pin-striped suit was the cleanest and most expensive set of rags Spike had ever seen hanging off the bartender's skinny form. Blighter was even wearing a tie.

Shrugging and laughing again, Willy twitched in his seat. "You know me, Spike. I roll with the punches."

"Smart men do." And you're not smart, Spike thought derisively. Still, Willy was living, worm-like proof that slipperiness and survival instinct could get you far in the world, if you snitched to the right people. It put Spike in strangely good cheer. Warm and fuzzy, like, because even in a world gone topsy-turvy, a snitch was still a snitch, a spy was just a spy. The fundamental rules applied. He repositioned one of the chairs and sat down on it, front to back. "You know, I'm feeling sociable. Think I'll join you."

"Captain," the lieutenant began awkwardly.

"Sit," Spike rapped out. The man sat. "Now," Spike said, turning down his smile to give Willy his full focus. "Where were we?"

The Initiative complex didn't have a lot to offer in the way of accommodations. Not like your finer
hotels. No mini-bar, no soft-core cable or hot tubs. And if you wanted to talk hot, it was very non, with constant drafts sweeping through the rooms and corridors. At least it did have ventilation, though. A total lack of oxygen could have presented a problem.

Xander was cleaning guns. He could do this well, strip them and oil them and reassemble them like a professional soldier. This was more or less an Army Guy thing--a parting gift of his old Halloween makeover that is, not of Riley. Riley hadn't shown him how to clean a gun. It hadn't even seemed to occur to him that Xander might really be interested in such things, even when Xander himself raised it as a topic of conversation. Trying to bond. Riley had tried to bond back of course, and it had been painfully obvious he was doing it for Buffy's sake, to get in good with her through her friends. But he'd pooh-poohed Xander's idea of going to a shooting range with a bucket of bullets. That's my job, he'd said. I don't do that for fun. Hey, why don't we rent a movie? You like Adam Sandler?

Good old Riley. Xander still missed the big lug, with his wooden sense of humor and enviably normal life--at least until he was revealed to be a genetically altered super-soldier controlled by Adam who eventually whored himself out as a blood snack for vampires. No one was perfect, though, and damn, he'd been so close to having a real guy friend for a change. A buddy. Sure it was more like a buddy-in-law, you might say, with Buffy the law, but it had been nice.

Was it actually possible to get tired of girls?

"Oh my god!" shrieked one of Dawn's gang from the other side of the room, her soprano going right through Xander's eardrums to his brain and lodging there like a fishhook. "You are so full of it! I never wanted to date him!"

"Oh, you so did!" Dawn crowed. High-pitched giggles and hoots followed her words.

"What are they doing?" wondered Tara, coming up in a swish of impractical skirts.

"Truth or dare. I think." Who cares, Xander thought. Whatever they were doing helped them pass the time and kept them out from underfoot, and that was all that mattered. "At least they're keeping their clothes on today." He grimaced, then mimed an elaborate shudder to lighten the tone. When had naked teenagers become such a turn-off? Boy, youth was fleeting.

Tara smiled impishly as she took a seat next to him at the table they'd scrounged from an abandoned office. "They're a lively bunch, aren't they."

"Crazy kids." Xander's hands continued to work as he spoke, swiftly and methodically punching the magazine home and racking the slide before releasing it. The smell of solvent hung in the air, vaguely comforting.

"How's it going here?" Tara asked, her gaze drifting across the weapons and cleaning supplies spread across the table. Something in her altered tone made Xander give her a second glance. Her face had lost its smile, assuming a mask too smooth to be truly neutral. He imagined the disapproval she was feeling.

"I know what you're thinking," he said conversationally, setting the gun down and picking up a new one. "Killing bad. And guns kill, so guns bad. A simple philosophy, but one I tend to agree with." He paused, held her eyes. "Except, killing demons? Not bad. So guns that kill demons, not bad. See how that works?"

Tara's mouth turned down. "You know I'll kill them if I have to. But they aren't all--"
"All what? Monsters? Actually they are."

"What about Kethas?" Tara turned her head, directing his gaze across the room to where the Bracken demon sat, slightly but noticeably apart from Dawn and her group. He was perched on a crate, arms dangling off his knees, while the others sat on the floor in a close circle.

"What do you want me to say, Tara--guilty until proven innocent?" Years of complicated moral and ethical frustrations had burned Xander's voice to harshness on this subject. "Fine. But these demons, the Grauth, they've proven themselves plenty guilty."

Tara was gracefully still and upright; her hands, clasped together on the table's scarred surface, somehow seemed to display a resolution that Xander consistently strove to achieve and failed, and even if what she'd resolved wasn't what he agreed with, he respected that about her. He sensed that whenever Tara was at her most certain, she was a gathered calm.

"Do you know Nietzsche?" she asked now.

"Do I know Nietzsche?"

He stared at her blankly. "He said, whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster himself."

"Wow," said Xander, feigning admiration with as little meanness as possible. She always meant well. "That would make a great tee-shirt."

Showing rare annoyance, she lowered her head slightly to frown at him. "You know what I'm talking about."

He sighed, his stubbornness easing along with the set of his shoulders. There was no point in arguing with her. "Yeah. I do," he said quietly. He bestowed a crooked smile. "But what if it takes a monster to fight a monster?"

Tara's gaze dropped to her hands, which shifted restlessly, and she didn't immediately speak. A flurry of movement and shouts from the other end of the room caught their attention. Kethas and one of the boys--Jason--were rolling together, limbs flailing as they tried to land blows. The girls had scrambled out of the way and were shouting at various pitches and decibel levels, urging them to stop. A candle was knocked over, landing on a blanket, which began to smoke. Dawn kicked it aside and stamped on it.

He was across the room in several long strides. "Hey," Xander said, on the chance that a sharp word might be enough to pry them apart. But when they continued to scuffle, he shouted more loudly, "Hey!" and reached down to yank them apart. His bark shook them and they slipped apart like scrapping puppies reprimanded by a larger dog. With hands twisted in their shirts, he dragged them to their feet and shoved them a few paces away from each other. "What the hell's going on here?"

Human and demon glared at one another with bristling animosity--literally bristling, in Kethas's case. His spikes stood out all over his angry face, and Xander wished he'd bothered to find out before now if they were oh, say, poisonous.

"This egg-face called me a Hellraiser," Kethas said, his fuming outrage spilling over. "I am not a Hellraiser, I am Bracken!"

Jason snorted. "I called you Pinhead, you freak." He turned to Xander, earnestly seeking understanding. "You know, from the movie Hellraiser?"

Oh, the temptation to nod and commiserate, cementing the bonds of movie geekdom and humanity.
But drawing on his full twenty-three years of authority, Xander ruthlessly suppressed the impulse and played it fair. "Both of you are on time out. Go to your separate corners, refine your insults and meet back here in half an hour. We fight our allies with words, our enemies with fists. Got that?"

The boys scowled but nodded, and he let them go. The group broke into camps, their babble rising again almost at once as he walked away.

"What was that all about?" Buffy asked as she came in with Willow. He and Tara met them at the common table, where Buffy pushed aside some guns and set a basket of fresh food down.

"Nothing." Xander watched her unpack bananas with a pensive eye. "Kid stuff." He found himself wondering how many more bananas were left in Sunnydale, and what happened when they ran out. No deliveries coming in, no banana boats docking in the harbor. A life without bananas. And then-what else? What next after that, after the bananas ran out and the apples and that sickening Kiwi Coke that Anya loved?

Buffy glanced toward their youthful refugees, her thoughts clearly still on the subject at hand. "Typical kid stuff, or Hellmouthy I've-made-my-therapist-a-millionaire kid stuff?" What do you think? Xander's eyes said when she met them. She grimaced in resignation. "We need to give them something to do."

"Yeah," said Willow, looking thoughtful. "A project."

"Ooh, and it should involve maps," pepped up Buffy. Everyone looked at her. "What? Maps are fun. Maps and little flags, and colored markers--those ones that smell like fruit."

"I love those," Willow said wistfully.

"Hey," said Xander. "Here's a wacky idea. Maybe we should train them to actually, you know, fight." Now everyone looked at him with reproachful girl eyes. Even Buffy appeared dubious at this suggestion, though from her face he could see her giving it thought.

"Xander, they're just kids." That was Willow, conveniently forgetting years of Scooby history. "What--you want to give them guns?"

It was a boggling question, to him if no one else. "No, I thought we could send them out with egg-beaters, whip our foes into a froth."

Willow's face shifted into an expression that said, I hear your sarcasm and will condescend to ignore it because I love you. "They'd be in more danger from carrying weapons than going without."

"That argument's only good in a war-free zone, Will."

Buffy took a deep breath, very leader-like with her troubled brow and air of responsibility. "I'm not sure about guns yet. Maybe we could start them on cross-bows, let them work up?" She looked to Xander with her question. He shook his head. He suspected she already knew the answer, but wanted him to say it.

"Cross-bows take a lot of upper-body strength, at least if you want any range or power. The beauty of guns is that any dummy or imbecilic four-year old can fire one." He jerked his head, not quite glancing over his shoulder. "Or these guys."

With curious regard, Buffy half smiled at him and said, "When did you become such a boy?"
"They tell me at birth," Xander said mildly. "But hey, what do they know."

Light music tinkled from the piano, the kind of stultifying classical piece whose notes would trap you like a fly in amber, smother all the air from your lungs, and suspend you for eternity in a tiny bubble to be dangled from some rich lady's wattled neck, while your trapped soul screamed and cursed the fates for bringing you to this hellish end and all around you a host of demons in colorful silk dresses lifted their tea-cups and laughed.

"This is very good cake, Lady Elk-Head," Anya said brightly. "What is your secret?"

"That's 'Elked', dear." The Grauth matron smiled and lifted her tea-cup. "It's a family recipe. The fremla beetles should be living when you blend them in. That makes all the difference." Her small eyes twinkled.

"Well, it's...amazingly chewy." Anya set down the plate on which she'd artfully rearranged her uneaten crumbs, and took up her own tea-cup. All around her, the Grauth ladies sat on sofas in poised watchfulness, as if waiting for her to spill its contents on her dress. Anya was quite certain that she was going to vomit from sheer nerves any minute now. Far more embarrassing than spilled tea, if that were to happen. Why the hell had she come here? "Thank you so much again for inviting me to your little party," she said, smiling too widely before taking a sip of tea, which still--yes--tasted of socks. Sweaty, unwashed socks. Hiding a tiny choke, she set the cup back into the saucer. It rattled more loudly than it should have.

"Well, it's more of a social club, really," said Lady Elked.

"Yes," said one of the other women, leaning forward eagerly. "The Grauth-Human Friendship Society."

Lady Elked beamed. "You are our first human member."

"Oh, that's...my." Anya stared around uncomfortably from under her lashes, wondering whether the women would chase her if she ran. Regrettable that she'd worn heels. It never paid to wear heels in Sunnydale, even to a tea-party. She knew she should be pleased to find herself, a single businesswoman, welcomed into the arms and parlors of the new elite--if nothing else, it would be very useful for making connections, not to mention new customers. But she wasn't sure yet what they wanted from her, and that put her on edge. "That's so very kind of you," Anya perked at last, desperate to fill the silence.

"And we want to learn all about your culture," the other woman said. Her small, curly horns lay wrapped closely to her head, like elaborate barrettes, visible only because her elaborate wig had over-balanced itself and was gradually sliding off the back of her skull. Anya tried not to notice as the woman went on. "Your movies, your music, your literature--all so fascinating."

"Yes, they are," Anya said without any enthusiasm. What did she know about literature? What would they talk about? *Anna Karenina*? There had been snow, and a train. Did they want to hear about that? She'd perused thousands of similarly themed books that she'd considered required reading for her job, gobbling them up in her rare and tedious off-duty hours while eating chocolates from a box (when, eventually, they had invented books and chocolates and boxes), and right now she couldn't remember a word of them.
"Tell me," said the wig-tipsy demon, voice lowering into the tone of one inviting a confidence, "have you ever met Bruce Willis?"

Spike had eventually shaken himself free of Raus to make his way alone through Special Forces HQ. It was a big building and easy to get turned around in; byzantine, you might say, if you used poncy words like that. He'd stumbled on a few meetings he hadn't been invited to, the admirably gory interrogation of a Slobchar demon, a martial arts class, a crude surveillance operation, two autopsies, three polygraph tests, and one supply-closet dalliance that made him wonder whether Buffy could be talked into wearing fishnet stockings. Most places he intruded on accepted his presence without demur, though a few times he was kicked out by colonels or cranky generals.

He'd reached a dark, dead-end hallway, tried a few locked doors and, bored, had just about decided to take his leave for the day and renew his hunt for Buffy, when a voice uncoiled from the shadows.

"Captain Aurelius, isn't it?"

Spike turned slowly to face the figure stepping from the recesses of the hall. A door behind him spilled a triangle of light across the dark tiles. "Don't think we've met," he said, squinting to make out his features. The man's next step brought him forward into the light to reveal a faceless mask of black, and Spike jumped back with more intuition than thought as a blur of arm rose from the man's side and a blade sliced the air where he'd been standing.

The first blow was followed by others in quick succession and, snarling and game-faced, Spike was driven back along the hall until he cleared the juncture of corridors, which gave him room to move. He curled like a snake out of the path of another swipe at his chest and used the opening it provided to throw himself at his attacker, knocking his arm wide and grabbing his sword wrist as they struggled. Within moments the weapon clattered to the ground, leaving the man unarmed against him, but no less formidable. A series of blows hailed against Spike's ribs him and it took a few moments to find the opportunity he wanted, before he smashed his fist into the man's jaw and sent him reeling.

It was a hell of a sweet fight, just what he'd needed to brighten his afternoon, and Spike poured himself into a storm of blows and kicks that his opponent answered fluidly. Within less than a minute they had tossed each other up and down the hall, breaking a few doors and supporting columns, leaving constellations of broken glass in their wake. A trickle of blood forked down Spike's cheek, whetting his enthusiasm for the dance, and he let the faceless man get in a few punches just for the fun of it, then parried effortlessly and spun him into the wall with a smash. The man shoved back and tried to kneecap him; Spike went briefly down on one knee and just as quickly came up again, driving into the other's gut like a battering ram, momentum carrying them both to the ground in a tangled roll that ended with Spike on top, fist raised to strike.

He felt the sudden cease of resistance which usually meant he'd beaten the life out of something, but in this case meant surrender. Suspicious, he paused, while the faceless man underneath him began laughing.

"Knocked your wits right from your head, did I?" Spike asked with guarded interest. "Let's see what we've got here." Instead of delivering his blow, he lowered his hand and peeled away the fencing mask to reveal a more or less human face. Surprised, Spike didn't sense another move
coming and found himself bucked off and thrown aside as the man twisted free. He stood ready for round two, but the man faced him without further attack.

"I'm Colonel Naziren. Head of Special Forces." He smiled, his face creasing, and Spike realized that what he'd taken for scars down each cheek were the ridged crests that indicated Grauth blood. He had the niggling feeling that something else was off, then noticed that his irises were as black as his pupils. Well, gee. That was downright spooky, wasn't it. Overall, Spike decided, he was one of your ruggedly handsome types. Tall, dark and broody—the kind of bloke women flung themselves at tit-first when they were looking for crime and a bit of punishment.

With a sardonic salute and an inclination of his bloodied head, Spike greeted his commanding officer. "So you're the boss of bosses. I can see why you head up the welcoming committee."

Naziren smiled again. "I like to get personally acquainted with all my men, at least once." He held out his hand. It took Spike a moment to figure out why, then he met the grip with his own. Strong. More or less human was tipping toward less. When Spike started to withdraw, Naziren held onto his hand and turned it over, studying it like a palm reader. Spike's brows crawled for his hairline, but he submitted to the examination. "Cool skin," said Naziren. He looked up. "Like ours."

"Yeah, but mine comes of being dead."

"I thought vampires existed in a state between life and death."


Letting go his hand, Naziren walked away to regather his sword. "Come." He left Spike to follow. After a moment, Spike did, trailing him back to the office he'd originally appeared from. Inside it was like the offices of a more sybaritic Oxford don and for a minute he forgot himself and marveled at the tortured marble statuary, the swords and stelae hung around the walls, the layered Oriental rugs and crackling hearth. And the books. Books everywhere, laddered to the ceilings, fat and thin, leathery and silky-looking, with spines in all colors but tending to the dark.

"Posh digs you've got yourself," Spike said. "Misleading from the outside. Probably get the odd tradesman knocking now and then." He waffled absently without bothering to see if Naziren was listening. He was still glowing from the fight, which mingled oddly with an urge to walk over to a bookshelf and take down one of its volumes. He quelled the feeling by reaching for his fags. A beat later, he remembered he wasn't carrying them and wanted to curse.

"Smoke?" Naziren said, flipping open an enamel cigarette box with one hand.

Silently, Spike took one and stuck it in his mouth. Before he could whistle jack, Naziren had followed up with a light. Suave bugger. Spike angled his head down and let the flame come up to meet him. A drop of blood rolled down his jaw and fell to the carpet, but neither of them paid it any mind. When the tip of his cigarette glowed, Naziren closed the lighter with a snap. Spike removed the smoke, contemplated it. "Potent tobacco."

"From our homeland." Naziren sidestepped and settled into one of the chairs in front of the fire. He gestured to the other. "Please. Have a seat, Captain. Let's...get to know each other better."

Oh, let's, thought Spike.

But he obediently took his place across from the Grauth and schooled himself to an equable composure, wearing the stolen face of a cat. Naziren had drawn his legs up and crossed them, showing off bare feet. What with the black garb and the darkish stare he was giving the fire, Spike
might have pegged him for an artiste, but he'd already proven himself to be more.

"Where are you from, William?"

Now was probably not the time to mention how much he hated being called that. At least, by anyone but Buffy. Spike curled his tongue into the corner of his mouth, licking at a pocket of blood, then said, "London. Paris. Hell."

Naziren picked up a knife from the table beside him. It was unsheathed, carved from something that had once had a tusk and now didn't. He fondled it absently. Spike's eyes narrowed. It was the kind of thing Angelus used to do, and he'd never held back from tossing his toys at you. For taking the piss, for speaking out of turn, for looking at him cross-eyed. For no reason at all.

As if reading his thoughts, Naziren looked up and caught his gaze, but the next words out of his mouth were, "How many people have you killed?"

"Lost count. Ran out of belt and bedposts fast, though." His mouth quirked coldly at Naziren's slight frown. "For the notches," he added.

"Guess."

"Maybe ten, fifteen thousand." He gave the colonel a flinty look. "I don't rank high in the list of global death tolls. Somewhere above Chernobyl and below the 1932 cholera epidemic, last I checked."

"But you're one man." Naziren's eyes were a brilliant focus, admiration like a prism in which Spike found himself bent. It had been a while since someone had looked at him like that, and for all the so-called wrong reasons. He wasn't sure how to take it.

"Not exactly Chairman Mao here, mate," Spike said, feeling oddly disinclined to brag. Where had his old brio gone, he wondered with a flicker of gloom and nostalgia. Oh, yeah. "You know I can't kill humans anymore. So was it your idea to recruit me, or did you lose a bet?"

"Neither. But I know how to take advantage of my assets." Naziren smiled. "I'm sure we'll find plenty for you to do."

They'd found maps, enough to satisfy Buffy's map-happy little heart. Currently, Willow and Tara were doing a locator spell for demon energies. The rest of them watched attentively as a mist of pale green light gathered over a detailed street map of Sunnydale. Even the kids had stopped their bickering long enough to huddle round the edges. It gave Xander an odd feeling of déjà vu he couldn't quite place and briefly, he wondered--would their lives be better or worse if they were trapped inside the Matrix?

"With your knowledge may we go in safety," said Willow. "With your grace may we speak of your benevolence." She opened her eyes to study the glowing map.

"Oh, pretty," said Dor.

"Pretty demons," Tara informed her dryly. 
Xander was caught up in the map's implications. "You can see the patterns of occupation," he said. "They've centralized in the downtown area." He began to point this out, then paused. "This stuff is safe, isn't it?" he asked, swirling his finger just above the glowy lights. "Non-toxic?" At Willow's smile, he traced a line down the center of town. "Here's Main Street." He bisected it. "Here's Buena Vista."

"That big clump must be City Hall," said Buffy, tapping her finger at a knot of light. "I noticed a Grauth seal hanging on it when I was in town. A kind of banner."

"It could be their base of operations," Willow said.

"That makes sense." Xander shifted, his voice taking on an edge. "Good location, on the bus lines and close to the theater district." Trusty sarcasm covered for an anger and fear too vast to contemplate. Their town lay stretched out on the table in front of them, and looking at the proof that it was overrun was like looking at ultrasound results for a cancer patient.

"What's this?" Tara wondered, indicating a small but dense swirl of light in the far corner of the map, green at the edges but deepening almost to black at the center. Everyone looked.

"That's Mount Siliyik," said Willow, squinting through the magical vapors at the map. "There used to be a Chumash reservation at the base."

"We took a trip to the museum there last month," Marcos put in. "Borrrring." Xander gave him a lock-jawed look of irritation, but the kid didn't notice. He knew his irritation was unfair. The kid was no more irreverent than he'd been seven years ago; it shouldn't bug him that a seventeen-year-old might not be taking things seriously enough.

"Is that the portal?" Dawn asked. Xander dragged his attention back and everyone exchanged glances for a silent moment, confirming that they'd been riding the same train of thought.

"Maybe," said Buffy, answering for all of them. "But it's a long trip for a maybe. Our first step is intelligence gathering so we know what we're up against. And for that we start closer to home." Her eyes were fixed to the map, and Xander's gaze lowered to the same spot. "City Hall."

A wispy, ground-crawling fog had materialized in the streets of Sunnydale, drifting out of alleys and hugging shopfronts as it spread. Spike didn't recall ever seeing its like before, but then he didn't remember a sodding big chestnut tree growing in the middle of Main Street either. Its leaf-laden branches spread out far enough to touch the shops on either side. Around it, a patchy bit of grass was fenced in with wrought-iron rails and dotted with benches and old-fashioned lamps to form a small park. A breeze rustled, sending a few orange leaves sliding to the ground.

"Lovely, isn't it?" remarked Naziren, strolling next to him, including the rest of downtown in his wandering gaze. "We have a corps of top wizards in charge of city beautification. Next up, cobblestones."

Interesting priorities, Spike thought but didn't say. It suited his interests well enough if they wanted to play with their erector sets instead of getting up to nastier business. Less call for him to jump through mental hoops as he tried to figure out what the hell Buffy would want him to do. "Better than a parking garage," he said aloud, then paused, tipping his head. "Though I rather like parking
garages. Prime hunting grounds."

Naziren glanced sidelong from under the brim of his cap. "You miss the hunt."

Did he miss it? Oh, too right he did. With an itch of fangs and stir of blood. Like learning to fly, then having your wings stripped off. Like being chained to a perch, your senses hooded, while all around you could feel the movement of mice, soft bodies begging to be ripped and gutted. A thing made to kill and feed, starving by inches. Pain in the head and pain in the gut, clouding the memory of what was natural, the fleet chase and the flirtations, how you watched and followed, driving your prey in the direction you chose, cutting her from the crowd, circling around to meet her with a smile of reassurance, reprimanding her for walking alone, offering your escort like a gentleman, all the while scenting the tantalizing nearness of her pulse, feeling her heart quicken and trip as her instincts warred with one another. And under a streetlight, you halted her with a touch on the arm, said listen with head cocked as if unnerved by the night sounds, and when she looked behind her, you ripped your mask off and tore out her neck, stifling all sound as passers-by approached and shook their heads at the licentious lovers and walked on, footsteps fading as she died in your jaws.

Spike gazed into the eyes of the girl in UC Sunnydale sweats who stood, white and upright as a tombstone, in his path. "Yeah," he said, walking through her, feeling her disperse around him like the fog. "Sometimes...hell, all the time. Pig's blood in a bag--'s like margarine instead of butter." His voice was deliberately hard, but he couldn't suppress a glance back at where the ghost had stood. Annoying bint.

"Perhaps there are benefits to your handicap." Blinking himself back to the conversation, Spike looked at Naziren with a bemused frown. "When a man is blind," the Grauth went on, "his other senses strengthen to compensate."

Struggling with this thought, Spike tried to apply it to his own condition. "What, you're saying a chip in the head builds character?" he said, half sourly, half wistfully. A dark splinter of a laugh escaped. "Wish you'd tell that to--" He broke off, compressing his lips before the name could reach them.

"To?" Naziren said lightly as they turned a street corner.

"Say," said Spike slowly, staring down the street. "Is that building supposed to be on fire?"

"Not if I don't know about it."

They looked at each other, then ran.

The manhole cover lifted and slid across the ground with a scrape quiet enough to go unheard in the alley but loud enough to send a rat scurrying away in search of less trafficked dinner spots. Out of the hole, two small hands came, followed by a blonde head. Buffy swung herself up and helped Willow and Dawn out. A moment later Xander appeared, climbing free.

"We need to talk about this new mass-transit sewer plan. Not liking it, I have to tell you."

Ignoring him with the ease of long practice, Buffy looked around and consulted the folded map she'd pulled from her pocket. "We should be right down the street from City Hall," she said.
Xander stood up from recovering the manhole and brushed off his hands. "Whoa, I smell bread. Oh, man." He inhaled deeply, closed his eyes with reverence.

Peering down the shadowed passage, Dawn observed, "We're next to the bakery." She turned a beseeching look at Buffy. "Scone break?" she said, voice rising in hope.

"Don't make me regret I brought you." Buffy warned, wondering why she had. The other kids weren't ready yet for excursions, and they'd had to leave someone of the adult variety to keep track of them. Poor Tara was becoming default babysitter. Dawn had cornered Buffy though, and begged to come, making long and convoluted arguments about her worthiness that drew on a laundry list of vampires killed, demons battled, and weapons mastered, until Buffy had caved more to shut her up than from conviction.

But the world had changed--war had arrived, a time of truth, and compared to most people Dawn was a veteran.

Her sister sighed. "So when do I get a gun?"

Never, thought Buffy. "When Xander says you're ready," she said. She put her map away and looked critically over their group. Dawn in black sweater and jeans, like a junior fashion model moonlighting as a cat burglar, but with a cross-bow strapped across her back. Willow, armed with a spell-bag that Buffy suspected was almost superfluous these days. Xander, resembling a backwoodsman with a high-velocity grudge against big government. And herself, embodying the spirit--and the flannel--of grunge. They weren't exactly the A-Team. She wasn't even sure they were in the alphabet. But at least she had the consolation of knowing they were more dangerous than they looked.

"Speaking of ready," Xander said, a gentle prod.

"Yeah," Buffy replied, gathering herself. "Okay. We'll come out of the alley on the west side of the grounds, and jump the fence there. We should have cover if we stick to the bushes. We'll go in through the side." She knew that she was repeating directions for the third time, at least, but her nerves were stretched thin. "If we run into any guards--run. Guns are a last resort. We don't want to attract--" A huge boom filled the night, sending shockwaves through the pavement, the disruption quickly followed by the unmistakable rattle of gunfire.

"--attention," Buffy finished.

With startled glances at one another, they made for the end of the alley and peered out. The street in front of them was lined with an innocuous collection of stores, closed for the night, and a few taller office buildings. In the middle of the otherwise empty street a figure in cammo stood with a shouldered weapon that Buffy was intimately acquainted with, aimed at the upper stories of a rooming house.

"Hey," exclaimed Dawn, "Is that a rocket launcher?"

Buffy was already running as fast as her feet could take her, but she heard the whistling arc of the rocket before she reached the shooter, and then the blossoming explosion hit. She slammed into the man's back, sending him to the ground and covering him as a hail of glass and splintered brick bounced around them. When she looked up, fire was sprouting from the upper windows. A burning form stumbled into view, then half-fell, half-dived to land on the sidewalk in front of the building.

Sickened, Buffy grabbed the collar of the person under her and wrenched him up to face her. He was just a man, she saw. Not a Grauth, but a soldier with a buzz cut and a bloody cheek. While she
was staring he smacked her in the throat and leapt to his feet. She grabbed her throat with one hand, coughing and trying to catch her breath, and heard Xander and the others run up.

"I wouldn't do that," Xander said, and Buffy looked up to see the soldier reaching for his pistol. Xander had his gun trained on him and wore a grim, no-nonsense expression. More gunfire was popping in the distance as smoke from the burning building rolled across the road.

Buffy drew herself upright, adrenaline mixing unpleasantly with pain to make her cranky. "Who are you--and what the hell are you doing?"

The soldier glared at her. He reminded her a little of Graham, with the same kind of unyielding bedrock behind his eyes that didn't soften for women. "Grissom. One twenty-third. Who the hell are you?"

"Buffy...class of '99." And, oh, screw it. Secret identity be damned. "Vampire slayer."

The man blinked, an uncertain look passing over his face before disappearing behind a frown. "Well, Buffy, what I'm doing is protecting this town from hostiles. So you might want to get out of my way."

She jerked a hand at the rocket launcher, then at the burning building. "There could have been humans in there!" As if to punctuate her words, the front door to the building was flung open with a bang. Grissom unholstered his gun in reflex and everyone looked over as Grauth families began streaming out, covered in soot and hacking from smoke inhalation. A few of the women wailed and sobbed and wrung their hands.

At the same moment they all heard the approach of a siren, the universal signal of emergency help on its way, even when the ambulances and fire engines had been appropriated by creatures from the pits of hell.

"We need to move," Xander warned, looking down the street.

"I haven't got time for this," said Grissom, and turned to leave.

Buffy grabbed his shoulder and spun him back around, feeling buried grievances she'd had with the military mind suddenly take a new lease on life. "Make time," she said flatly, and yanked him toward the alley. He went grudgingly while the others brought up the rear. In the relative safety of the alley, she shoved him against a wall and put her hands on her hips. "Talk."

He rubbed his face and looked them over as if he highly doubted their authority to make demands, but Buffy was used to that and waited him out with a gimlet eye. "Look," he said finally, "I don't know who you people are, but you're human, so we're on the same side. We're taking back this town tonight. These fires are just a diversion."

"Fires?" Willow repeated, face creasing.

Grissom paid her no attention, concentrating on Buffy. "You want in on the action, that's fine with me. But I've got to get back to my squad now."

A hundred questions jostled in Buffy's head and clamored to get out. She may not have a great fondness for the military, but right now they were the only game in town and they had their uses. "How many of you are there? What's your plan? What do you need?"

Before she could get any answers, there was a tattoo of boot heels from nearby and then a voice called out from down the alley, "Grissom! Come on, man!" Another soldier in cammo waved
impatiently. Grissom pushed past Buffy, sprinting away without hesitation.

"This is getting more Strangelove by the minute," Xander said.

"What do we do?" Willow's anxious gaze was cutting Buffy open for answers. "We didn't plan for this. An attack of this scale, this soon--I don't know how much magic I can summon."

"They're way out of their depth," Buffy said quietly. "They can't win." She knew that in her gut, and yet some tiny part of her hoped it might turn out otherwise. "The question is, do we stick around and help?"

"Of course we help," Xander shot back, intensity sharpening his voice. He held his gun raised, pointing at the sky.

"And if we're sacrificing our lives for a snowball fight in hell?" Buffy asked him, holding his gaze. "We're probably the only chance this town has."

His eyes were dark but clear. "Then you go--I'll stay." He smiled faintly, diffidently. "No one can say the fate of the world depends on me."

Buffy swallowed, moved by his bravery even as she hated everything that demanded it. Any minute now she was going wake up from all this and be in her own bed, watching daylight hit her window as she shook herself free of dreams and faced another boring, ordinary day at the magic shop.

Any minute now.

"We all go, or we all stay," Buffy said. She stole a look at Dawn and then Willow, whose faces reflected the same certainty.

Dawn raised her chin a half-inch, her eyes glinting. "Let's kick some ass," she said.

The burning building was a townhouse whose bricks matched the color of the smoke billowing from its windows. When Spike reached the scene with Naziren, an overhanging tree had just caught fire and its canopy was quickly scorched bare, leaving its skeletal arms burning. A red blanket hung incongruously from one low branch, twisting up into a curl as flames rose along its edges. The street outside the house was churning with human women, many crying and slumping against their Grauth captors. Heavy chains laced their necks and arms.

"The auction house," Naziren said, nodding at the conflagration.

"Humans," Spike said, eyeing the crowd.

"For the most part."

"Someone help," moaned a woman, looking wildly around. Her blonde hair flared around her head, strands lifting and dancing on the wind like a parody of the blaze. "Please--my sister's still inside!" Her eyes locked on Spike with a plea as she mistook him for human. "Please save her!"

A moment earlier he'd had not the slightest inclination to put himself out, but now some vastly
regrettable instinct drove Spike forward. Before he could make it two steps, a hand latched onto his arm, drawing him back. "Not exactly your element, William," Naziren cautioned. "The fire brigade will be here soon."

Spike met the woman's eyes and forced himself to look away. It wasn't as if he really gave a toss. Who cared about one more soft body, when the smell of blood and death was thickening in the air? If he was honest, and he was always brutally honest with himself, it might as well have been a cook-out. In the midst of grief and roasting flesh, he was getting hungry, pangs stirring and exciting him with a restless need to...attack, fight, kill. These were his true instincts, deeper than any mirror could reflect. Everything else was just frippery and diversion.

Still, he liked frippery. Damn.

A not-so-distant boom shook the street, sending light ripples through the plate-glass windows along the street. Naziren drew his breath in with a hiss of anger. "This isn't an isolated incident," he said. "We're under attack."

"What do we--" Spike glanced over, but Naziren was already racing off. "Right then," he said, a bit at a loss. "You go ahead. I'll just catch up."

Xander would rather have stayed by himself, a one-man show with no one else to worry about. Buffy and Willow could handle themselves, but they had all split up, and somehow he'd pulled Dawn duty. Her presence made him nervous.

"Sorry you got stuck with me," she said as they crept down the alley. Spooky little mind-reader.

With a reassuring flash of smile, he stopped and pulled out one of his other weapons, a pistol he'd had shoved in the small of his back. "Here," he said. Her expression was amazed. "You remember how to use this, right? Like I showed you."

"I remember," she said, rallying stoutly. The gun looked huge and strange in her delicate hand. She tucked it into her pocket, then pulled out her cross-bow, gave him a half-smile. "Figure I'll shoot my wad with this first."

Xander's eyes widened a fraction. "Okay, you can shoot that gun--but leave the R-rated talk to the professionals, missy."

"Deal."

"Come on," he said, glancing down the passage. "We're gonna need to get closer."

Buffy and Willow didn't have a hard time finding the center of the action. The square in front of City Hall was teeming with Grauth and Army forces in ferociously pitched battle, with countless smaller skirmishes overflowing into the surrounding streets. In the middle of the square, a statue dating from the first world war loomed with outsized indifference above the combatants milling
around its base. As Buffy watched, a Grauth stumbled back into it, shoved by a human soldier who was using the long barrel of his gun to try and choke the demon, without much success. A moment later, the Grauth got the upper hand and sent the soldier sprawling to the ground from a blow to the head.

"I'm going to get a better vantage," Willow said as she took in the view. "For the spells." Buffy nodded distractedly and Willow headed off, skirting the square as she ran.

Well, here's where I do my stuff, Buffy thought, and looked around for a place to start. Spotting a Grauth soldier nearby taking aim at an unknown target, she launched herself at him, knocking him out cold and taking his semi-automatic away as he fell. With the weapon gripped in both hands, feeling like Rambo and hoping she looked more like Ripley, she took position and began shooting.

"Ah ah ah," Spike said, stepping in front of a running human soldier and watching with interest as he bounced off and fell dazed to the ground.

Spike reached down and picked up the man's gun with an eyeful of appreciation for its design. Useful bit of hardware--if you were able to use it. "Interesting thing," he said, turning his irritable attention back to the groaning slab of meat on the pavement. "Chip doesn't fire for mosher and suicidal gits like you." He drew the dazed man upright, wondering what to do with him. "So, er, go turn yourself in, okay?" The man stared at him, mouth gaping unattractively as he processed this in befuddlement. Spike rolled his eyes. "Wink wink, nudge nudge--what do I have to do, paint you a bloody picture?" He vamped out. "Run!"

The man did.

"That's the spirit, mate," Spike remarked to himself through his fangs. "Live to die another day." He lifted the gun he'd taken and inhaled a lungful of smoky air. "Now let's see. Which way's the fun?"

The sky stretched above the rooftops, vast and dark. No clouds broke the false night, but the illusion of stars clung to its roof like a billion sightless eyes. Willow stood with her feet planted on the safety wall that edged the roof she'd chosen, the tips of her boots jutting over the edge, sixty feet above the battle taking place below. With hands outstretched, she bid the power to flow into her.

"Surasundari, Caligo, Umbria, hear me. I seek you in supplication. I offer my hands to you and my praise."

The familiar electricity was filling Willow, and the blackness of power opening like space in her soul. It rolled down from her head to her hands, tingling as it charged. It was brilliant, it was beautiful, it was--

Good.
She opened the bruised pools of her eyes and looked out over the town square. "Fire, fire burning bright, in the darkness of the night; strike your tongue upon the bane, bring them death and bring them pain."

Fire shot from her hands and broke like lightning across the square, and screams soon filled her ears. Willow almost smiled, but it might have just been the shifting of her skin as her own dark spirits rose to the surface and replaced her face with their own.

"That's Willow," Xander said with awe, watching as an arc of fire shot through the air and landed amid a nearby knot of Grauth. Demons went flying on impact, uniforms burning and peeling from their bodies. He squinted toward the roof-top, trying to see her, but couldn't make out anything through the smoke. Impatient to join the fray, he began edging closer to the square, darting out from behind the protection of a building to take position next to an unattended car. Dawn dogged his heels and crouched behind him.

His heart was hammering in his chest as if powered by trolls, making him slightly breathless. It was time to cut Dawn loose, he realized; she didn't belong in a fire-fight. "Take cover," he said to her. "Choose your targets, and if anyone sees you, run--you can take the tunnels back to the Initiative."

"Xander, wait!" She pulled at his sleeve.

Pausing, torn by conflicting imperatives, he wasn't sure if he'd have been able to make himself stay, but he didn't get a chance to find out because just then a Grauth soldier appeared.

The mist rolled in, mingling with smoke from scattered fires, and Spike materialized from the fog at the edge of the town square, a thing black and glittering in uniform, cape swinging around him. His head tilted as he lit a cigarette. A Grauth civilian ran by, dragging a roped line of crying girls. Ignoring them, Spike looked casually out over the battle, eyes glittering with fascination at the chaos he surveyed. He half-smiled, wondering what Dru would say if she were here--it was her kind of spectacle--and then the smile was wiped off his face. His cigarette dropped unnoticed from suddenly nerveless fingers.

"Dawn," he breathed, face slack in disbelief. The wind sent a drift of smoke rolling across the vision, snapping him from his shock. Rage slammed into him like a tiger and he snarled, running toward his last sight of her, cutting across one edge of the square. He threw off anything that got in his way, wincing a few times as his velocity spun aside humans, the pain only increasing his determination and fury. By the time he'd reached the other side, he'd skinned off his human face again and was looking for something to kill.

The Grauth soldier in front of him barely had time to register his arriving growl before Spike wrenched his neck with a crack and dropped him to the ground. Xander and Dawn, their hands raised in a frozen pose of surrender, stared at him in startled relief.

Violence pulsing through him, Spike couldn't have devamped if he'd tried. He grabbed Xander's
shirtfront and shoved his face close to the human's. "What is she doing here?" he said coldly, the urge to maim leashed in by only a few millimeters of government-issue metal.

"Fighting," Xander said, swallowing only once. "Like the rest of us."

"Let him go," Dawn said.

Caught off guard, Spike looked over to find a pistol in his face and the littlest Summers holding it. He let Xander go, a reluctant delight stirring in him. "Look at you," he said with admiration. "All tough and gun-toting." He cocked his head as he inspected her grip. "Might want to take the safety off, pet."

Her mortified expression was precious, more so when Xander turned to her accusingly and said, "You said you remembered how to use it!"

"I'm sorry!" she said, squeakier than she likely intended.

Xander shook his head. "You're lucky it's just Spike."

"Hey," Spike said, out of habit. "I'll have you know I'm a high-ranking...oh, sod it." It wasn't worth it. Scowling at Xander, he counter-attacked with, "Why don't you do something useful and get her out of here. This is no place for kids."

The human looked briefly guilty, then said to Dawn, "He's right. This probably wasn't a good idea."

"Buffy said I could come," Dawn retorted with a flash of spirit.

"Buffy's here?" Spike broke in sharply. "Of course Buffy's here," he added, answering his own question with self-disgust. Pointing at them, he commanded, "You two--go home." He whirled before either of them could voice the protest clearly rising to their lips, and headed back into the square where he belonged. With his love. Fighting by her side.

The power shuddering through Willow was beginning to take its toll, raising a fire within her to match the fire she created, a fever that would burn her out if she kept it up. She cried out as the pain became too great, and felt the current flicker and die. Slumping at the edge of the roof, she caught her breath and gazed down over the scene below. The battle had turned with her help; the human Army forces now seemed to outnumber the remaining Grauth and were driving them back from the square. On the stones below lay scores of charred and smoking bodies, curled into unnatural shapes like the letters of a demon alphabet.

It filled her with a sense of triumph greater than she'd ever felt before, and for a moment she savored her own power and what it could wreak.

Then she heard the choppers approaching and saw the lights of endless trucks racing down the darkened streets, closing in from all sides. And she knew it hadn't been enough.
"Buffy," Spike yelled through the smoke and fog. "Slayer!" He should be able to sense her, he thought with a surge of self-contempt at his ineptness. But she was nowhere in range, and he could only curse and cut a swathe through the remaining forces as he searched.

Buffy had emptied her gun of bullets, borrowed a few more and emptied them, and then kicked enough ass to put a scuff on her boots. Around her, human soldiers were chasing down fleeing Grauth, pushing them back from the perimeter of City Hall. Sensing it was time to relocate the fight, she scooped up a gun lying near the outflung hand of a dead demon and headed out of the square at a trot, trying to figure out the direction of the tunnel entrance. Was the bakery ahead or behind her?

"Slayer!" she heard, in a voice that froze her with recognition. She halted on the edge of the square, peering back through the mists, then whirled at a movement behind her, bringing her gun up for one terrible moment before she recognized who it was.

"Dawn!" Buffy looked past her sister, searching and finding an unwelcome absence. "Where's Xander?"

Panic shone in Dawn's eyes. "We were heading home--but he left me in the alley and went back to get guns. He said we'd need them. I waited, but he didn't come!"

"Damn it!" Anger and frustration surged in Buffy's chest, almost strong enough to override her fear. She didn't know whether to be frustrated with herself or with him. She tried hard to give her friends their due, not to second-guess their moves. Too many times the one running off half-cocked had been her, and with equally good or not-so-good reasons. But it was hard to be fair and reasonable in the middle of disaster. And that's what this felt like.

As Buffy was trying to decide what to do, Willow ran up, her previously shiny red hair looking fried, her eyes circled with dark feathers of exhaustion. "There's more troops coming," she said.

"Army?" Buffy said, heart skipping with renewed optimism.

"Grauth." Having dashed her brief hope, Willow looked around anxiously. "Where's Xander?"

"Oh my god," Dawn cried in a strangled scream, hands flying up to cover her mouth as she stared past them toward the square, and Buffy turned, not wanting to see what she was going to see.

The mists had cleared enough to reveal a troop of arriving Grauth led by a tank, whose turret gun poked out menacingly as it nosed through the square. On the stones knelt a handful of captured prisoners, hands lashed behind them. Xander was among them, profiled with a slightly hanging head in front of a pacing guard, rivulets of blood visible on his face.

"No," Buffy said, starting forward, but Willow and Dawn grabbed her. "No!" said Buffy more loudly, as Willow shushed her in desperation. Buffy felt her all the little clicky parts of her brain tumbling and tumbling, like a ball on a roulette wheel, but she knew she couldn't come up with a winning plan for this. She latched fiercely onto Willow, fingers digging into her friend's arm. "A spell, you have a spell--"
"There's too many of them, Buffy--and I'm all juiced out." Willow's face wore a mirror of her own agonized despair.

Buffy turned back, mind still busily scrabbling for answers, and went a funny kind of still all over as Spike strode out of a break in the fog and joined the company of Grauth. He greeted one of the officers with a smart salute, and stood several yards away from the prisoners, lips moving in a mild and conversational fashion, saying things she couldn't hear. His black cloak flared behind him with an errant wind and she watched him scan the square from under the brim of his cap, an arrogant curve to his cheek and jaw. He didn't look over at Xander. Xander didn't look up at him.

Suddenly his gaze arrested in her direction. Buffy stiffened and moved back a step, deeper into the shadows of the alley. He might be able to see her, even from such a distance. Keen vampire eyesight, her own blonde hair. He was tilting his head, he was--

He was nodding.

Buffy swallowed down her fear. And nodded back.

Well, this was fun.

Xander sagged in his chains, tried to blow a strand of hair from one eye, failed, blew again, failed, blew again. When he focused, the Grauth guard was staring at him in something close to wonderment, as if he were a peculiar type of zoo animal on display.

"Hair in my eye," he said. "Hate that." He smiled, cracking the mask of blood on the left side of his face. The vision on that side was a bit blurry, but he figured that would correct itself when the swelling went down. He hoped.

"Say, you wouldn't happen to have a Fresca, would you?" Xander asked. Impassively, the Grauth lifted his whip and brought it down across Xander's chest again. "Guess not." The manly, sardonic thing was working for him. He felt pretty sure of that. He had a whole Clint Eastwood vibe going. It hurt like hell, though. Clint...had the man ever cried? You had to wonder. Did he have a soft side? Or even one soft cell in his body? Maybe a fondness for daytime soaps. Yeah, you could see that. Disney cartoons? Bet he'd cried at The Way We Were. How could you not...that and Dumbo were the two saddest movies ever, and no, he wasn't a girl, he was a man, like Clint.

Snap went the whip.

Xander raised his head with a sharp intake of breath. "Can we go back to the part where you question me and I crack wise? Because I think--"

Snap.

"--I think we had a real rapport going."

And then Spike entered the room. Xander stiffened, unable to look away from the casual stroll of his black boots, the movement of his hand rising across his body, removing the cigarette that had been perched cockily in his mouth. His cap was angled low over his eyes, making them sly and shadowed and dark.
"I was wondering when you'd show up to gloat," Xander said, blinking away a fresh trickle of blood.

Spike tilted his head curiously, impeccable in its reserved regard. "Do I know you, human?" He spoke slowly and measuredly, and managed to inject real puzzlement into his tone, matching the slight frown between his brows.

"What's the matter, Spike? Don't want them to know you've rubbed shoulders with the rebel element?" He laughed and said to the guard, "You people are suckers for trusting him. He'll turn on you the first chance he gets." Spike's eyes lost their pretense, flashing a clear and impatient warning over the guard's shoulder, but Xander ignored it. "Forget about me. If you want to get yourself a promotion, arrest him. He's the real menace you should be worried about."

The guard looked at Spike doubtfully and perhaps a touch suspiciously. "Do you know this man, sir?"

"Never seen him before," Spike said with dismissal, his cold eyes boring into Xander's.

"Oh, Spike and I go way back. We even lived together once." Xander paused, glanced at the guard again. "Not in a gay way." Even if he was about to be tortured to death by demons, he wanted to make that very clear.

Spike rolled his eyes, then quickly composed his face when the guard squinted back at him. "Poor chap must be demented," he said in a brisk, not-quite-Spike voice that turned into a more familiar scoff. "You ever heard of a vampire living with humans?" He took off his cap and cloak and placed them on a chair. "Why don't you go get yourself a coffee," he suggested. "I'll take over the questioning for a bit." A nasty, suggestive smile crossed his face.

"Yes, sir."

The guard left. Spike watched him go until the door closed behind him, then turned to Xander, head swiveling slowly and threateningly, like a raven eyeing a worm. He looked more disgusted than angry, though. "Are you the thickest git on this planet?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

"Count your blessings I'm chipped, mate, because at this point I'd have to kill you on principle before you pissed in the gene pool."

"Guess there's no chance you'll ever have children, huh. What a pity." Xander shifted in his chains and dripped some more on the floor. He could see Spike eyeing his blood with a greedy glint. "If you lick me, you are so dead."

"Wouldn't sully my tongue." Then he moved closer, face softening, eyes turning sympathetic. "You in a lot of pain?"

Despite himself, Xander felt the compulsion of an honest response. "Only when I breathe."

The sympathy dropped off Spike's face, replaced by a smirk. "What a pity." But while Xander hung in an irritated seethe, he inspected Xander's wounds, walking around him full circle with a critical detachment possessed only by veterans and vampires. "Just warming up so far, looks like. You'll live."

"Long enough for them to kill me," Xander said bitterly.
Spike frowned. "Yeahhh. Now that's a problem."

"And you'll cry big tears, I'm sure."

A look of exasperation crossing Spike's face, he poked Xander in his unprotected gut, not hard enough to set off any chippy retribution. "Not going to let you die, am I?"

"Because what would Buffy say," Xander remarked with knowledgeable cynicism.

"Oh, perfect timing," Spike said irritably, but not to Xander. He was talking to the empty air by his side. "Why don't you wear some big neon blinkers so I can be sure not to miss the moral."

Okay, suddenly it was more disturbing to think Spike might be crazy than to think he might be evil, because Evil Spike might help him escape for his own reasons, but who knew what Crazy Spike might randomly decide to do next. "Who the hell are you talking to?"

"Never mind. Just some ghost with a mission to tick me off." He glared sideways at the air. "The more you hang about, the less torn up I am," he warned the emptiness.

For a moment, Xander felt an almost universe-altering sense of absurdity that transcended mere hatred. "Spike, you light up my life. Don't ever change. Die, sure, but don't ever change."

Spike gave him an odd, bemused look. "Love you too, Harris."

"So how are we breaking out of this joint?"

"Haven't got a clue." Spike seemed put out, but had resumed his frowny thoughtfulness. "Can't just march you out of here and turn you loose--they'd check up. Could pretend to kill you, but that's risky."

"Uh, yeah." Xander shifted in his chains as Spike paced the cell and smoked. His welts burned and his hands were beginning to go numb. "Any chance you could loosen these manacles?"

"Better not. Wouldn't look good."

"Oh, yeah. You're a real friend to the downtrodden human, aren't you. How could I ever have doubted you?"

"Hey." Spike pointed his cigarette at him. "Next time don't get caught."

It was hard to argue with that. Xander thought about doing so anyway--because, really, what else was there to pass the time? But he held his tongue.

"I've got an idea," said Spike, stopping in mid-pace. Xander, who'd been absently admiring the cut of his suit, guiltily glanced up in relief. "Wait here," the vampire said, exiting the room.

Xander watched him go with resignation. "Always the comedy man."

Outside the cell, Spike headed for the officer's break room, the facets of his plan unfolding in his mind. Sometimes he amazed himself with his own brilliance. He'd have to call Raus, see how to go about officializing the details. There had to be paperwork you could file for this sort of thing.
"Captain Aurelius," said a smooth voice, interrupting his thoughts.

Spike halted and turned. It was Naziren, standing at the other end of the hall with arms laced behind his back. He'd taken off his cloak, and in the uniform he'd changed into earlier cut an imposing figure.

"I'd like to debrief you on our recent engagement." The colonel stood next to an open door, signaling an unmistakable expectation of Spike's attendance.

"Right," Spike said distractedly. "Just give me two ticks--" He began to turn away.

"Now, Captain."

Steel had entered the Grauth's tone and Spike was forced to turn back. "Sir," he said carefully, searching for a ready and reasonable excuse. A good con artist was never totally bankrupt of those. But there was no leeway in Naziren's eyes, and after a momentary battle of impulses and will, Spike clenched his jaw and nodded in obedience. "Yes, sir."

When the door opened again several long minutes later, Xander looked up with a complaint for Spike ready on his lips. But it wasn't Spike, and it wasn't the guard from before. This time it was a Grauth soldier in uniform black, carrying a small leather bag. Xander's eyes fastened to it with an apprehension that made his breath hitch. Small leather bags were never good. Oh, no sir. Serial killers carried those, and mobsters, and other people who needed hobbies.

"Okay, I saw that scene in Marathon Man," he said to the Grauth, who was setting down his bag and removing his tunic. "I was only eight and it made a big impression on me." He offered a sickly, lopsided smile and swallowed. "So, hey. What do you want to know?" He wouldn't of course tell them anything important, but he could make stuff up. He was a pretty good liar. Few people truly knew that about him--in itself a mark of success.

The Grauth smiled at him as he rolled up his sleeves. "Such a hurry," he said. "Do not be in a hurry. We have all the time in the world." He came close and turned Xander's head from side to side, examining his wounds.

"Actually, I have a date later. She gets angry if I keep her waiting. Throws things. She once threw a hamster at me. It's not quite as bad as it sounds. It was dead. Frozen, in fact. But...but that's another story."

Taking a nut from one pocket, the Grauth popped it in his mouth and chewed crunchily as he prodded Xander's ribs. He had an air of relaxed competence to him that didn't bode well. You didn't want your torturers to be at the top of their profession. You wanted them to be the guys who slid by at the bottom of the curve, cutting class and skipping the finals.

"You are a comic, ka?" There was joviality in the Grauth's voice, a conversational tone. "I tell jokes myself. My wife, she will not laugh. Tell me, have you heard the one about the three-tailed zygarak?"

Xander blinked. "Uh, no."

"It made the beds that much quicker!" Tapping the side of his nose and winking, the demon broke
into chuckles and turned away toward his bag. Xander watched him open its mouth and rummage inside. Please let it not be dentistry. Or anything involving orifices of the body.

"I can see you have a bright future ahead in the Borscht Circuit," Xander said, hearing his voice rise in pitch as his heart accelerated. He couldn't shut off the babble valve. "I have an uncle who does bookings. I could make a few calls--" The Grauth held up his hand and Xander stopped, staring at the glove he was drawing on. It was black metal and it crackled with electricity.

The Grauth soldier turned back around with the glove upraised, blue sparks arcing across its gleaming surface. "I apologize," he said in a low, sincere voice. Xander stared at him. "I cannot remember," the demon went on, "if your species has one heart or two." He waited expectantly for a moment, but Xander said nothing. "Well, I'm sure we'll find out." Taking a step closer he placed his hand just in front of Xander's chest, millimeters from the skin. "Now," he said gently. "Tell me if this hurts."

"That's it," said Buffy, nodding across the street at the deceptively ordinary looking building to which she'd followed Spike and the prisoners. "That's where they're holding him." Willow and Dawn pressed close to her, their own gazes locked on the guarded gates. She could feel their worry as if it were a living presence, a kind of trembling heat that begged and gave comfort.

"What are we going to do?" Dawn asked. Her voice was thin but brave. "Are we going to break him out?"

Buffy looked at her sister, so young in years but so old, standing in a dark alley in the middle of a demon-infested town, gun in hand and ready to use it. She wanted to hug her, but it wasn't the right time. "No. We're not." She glanced at Willow. "Spike is."

Tensing, Willow's face revealed her bitterness at this news. "Buffy, my god, you can't trust him. Not with Xander's life. Not at all! You've seen what he is."

"I know what I've seen. What have you seen?" It was the first time she'd asked about Spike's part in the visions, and she wished she had sooner. After the shock of seeing Spike on that stage in uniform, being celebrated as a hero of the New Grauth Reich, she hadn't been thinking like an investigative reporter or even a girlfriend, but a slayer. And since then she had been thinking of him as little as possible. Now she couldn't afford ambiguity or ignorance.

"I-I told you what I saw--I saw him betraying us."

"How?" Buffy asked impatiently. "What did he do? Is he unchipped now? Did you see him hurt someone?"

Willow's face was a petaled curl of confusion, as if Buffy's questions were meaningless. "I saw him smiling as the town burned, dressed as a traitor. And you, you were captured."

"He captured me?" she said skeptically. Somehow when she tried to envision this, all she could see was her fist capturing his face.

"Buffy, the visions weren't like a, a movie reel. And okay, maybe it wasn't all spelled out, but it wasn't hard to read between the lines."
Between the lines. Over the years Buffy had spent a lot of time between the lines, done some heavy reading there herself. She couldn't blame Will for that, but maybe it was time for her to take another look at the lines themselves. Time for both of them. "We'll have to talk about this later. Right now, I have to trust Spike. He's the only one who can get Xander out." A look of hurt flashed across Willow's face, one that Buffy recognized; it was the hurt of accepting one's own uselessness in a situation. Right now she wore hers on the inside.

"What if he can't get him out?" Dawn asked. "I mean, we don't know how much of a big shot he is. Just how much he acts like he is.”

Somewhere in that muddled remark was an actual intelligent thought, but her sister's question was even more important. "If Spike can't break him out, I break in." She eyed the roof. "If I can climb up, I should be able to--"

"Look," Willow whispered.

Across the street, the front doors were opening. The guards snapped to attention, and one hastened to hold the entrance wide as Spike walked out with Xander next to him. Watching with her heart in her throat, Buffy saw Xander stumble on the steps as he descended. Spike's hand shot out and gripped his elbow, steadying him. Instead of protesting or pulling away, Xander leaned against him a little. They moved together down the front walk and out the gates, then hesitated together.

Biting one side of her lip, Buffy said, "Spike" and saw him cock his head. Then, a moment later, he began to stroll with Xander toward their hiding place. When they appeared, she had to stifle a gasp at Xander's appearance. His face was bruised and scraped, and pale as paper under the injuries. He stumbled again slightly and Spike guided him into Willow's waiting hands.

"Xander!" she cried softly, wrapping her arms around him. He hugged her as if there had never been any acrimony between them these past few weeks, and Buffy felt another rip in the fabric of friendship close up as it healed.

"Hey," he said to them all, smiling over Willow's head at Dawn and Buffy, then wincing visibly. Willow pulled back. "How badly are you hurt? What did they do to you?"

"I'm okay. Just some light whipping and the Body Glove of Pain." He took a careful breath. "Full report later, I promise. But...I'm all right." Glancing to the side where Spike lurked in his fidgety silent way, Xander added, "Thanks." His voice was flat, the delivery a formality, but the word signaled to the rest of them that Spike had helped, and at least one subtle undercurrent of strain eased.

Only to flare up again as Dawn said furiously to Spike, "He was beaten! You didn't stop them?"

"Couldn't," Spike replied shortly.

This plummeted into the conversation like a stone for a few endless beats until Xander, effort written on his face, dug further into himself to say, "Scared the piss out of my pen pal, though." The words came out in a kind of methodical acknowledgment. "Don't think he'd seen the fangs before. Pantywaist." He coughed a few times, then dragged in a breath.

"C'mon," Willow said. "We need to get you out of here." She eased around and took one arm as Dawn took the other.

"You guys go on," Buffy heard herself say. Willow cast her a sharp glance and looked as if she was about to say something, then didn't. No good-byes were made as they left.
And then she was alone with him, for the first time in weeks. They looked at each other; looked each other over. Buffy's eyelashes felt heavy; that must be why her eyes dropped from his clear blue ones to study his uniform jacket instead.

"I've been looking for you, slayer."

"That was good, what you did," she said, talking to the shiny ribbons on his breastplate. "Getting Xander out."

"And Anya--bloody wench wouldn't tell me anything."

"What'd you have to do, bribe the guards?" She forced herself to meet his eyes again, just in time to see the flare of impatience cross his face. Then his features readjusted themselves to a familiar resignation and he sighed.

"I registered him as a snitch."

She blinked. "Say huh?"

"Told them he was useful, got important intel for me. Too valuable to damage. All that sort of yak. Don't know why they bought it, really," he said, voice lifting a little. "Anyone looking at him could see what a priceless wally he is."

Despite his meanness, she smiled faintly. "But you got him out anyway."

"Well, yeah." He stared at her, frowning. "Knew you'd come over all weepy and pitiful if I let the boy get scragged." Eyes narrowing, he added warily, "Not going to shoot me again, are you?"

"Give me a reason not to."

Permission granted, he took a step closer, and his voice lowered to an earnestness she wished she could believe. "I'm doing this for you." There was an intensity to his gaze, a shining light from within, like something luminescent rising from the darkest fathoms. It felt like forever had passed between them. She'd forgotten how he could look at her, what it did to her. What had their last fight been? She couldn't remember that either. Something pointless and small and stupid, timed to coincide with the end of the world as they knew it. Everything had changed since then. And here he was still talking, desperate tones making his voice husky. "All this, Buffy," he said. "It's just flash and gimcrack. So I can help. That's all I want, love. To help."

"So help me," she said, grabbing hold of his jacket and wrenching him one final step closer.

He made a ragged sound, close enough to paint false breath across her lips. His eyes half-closed, he looked as if he were in pain, and then he grabbed her roughly and kissed her. His hands clasped her arms like steel cuffs and his lips bruised hers, but his tongue was silken and fluid, eating up her breath. She shoved against him without any decorum, hips riding his as her own hands roamed. His uniform was thicker than she'd expected, of some heavy material that wouldn't give.

They stumbled against the wall, catching their breaths, and then a horn blared from the street and they both stiffened. It was just a Jeep passing, but its closeness was a spur and drove them deeper into the alley and then inside one of the buildings.
"Easy," Willow said as they stumbled on the way back toward their bolt-hole. On his other side, Dawn pressed closer as if ready to support him in case he fell.

Xander took a deep breath and stopped, straightening. The women were forced to halt too, but didn't entirely let go of him. It was like being herded home by friendly sheepdogs. Not that he'd make the comparison in so many words. Out loud. "I'm actually not in bad shape here," he reassured them, finding a smile in reserve. "This awkward hobble you see me perform is just a blatant excuse to squeeze a little TLC from my two favorite girls."

Raising her brows, Dawn said, "I'm thinkin' that short list would look a bit different if Anya were here."

"I swear--of all the women in this alley, you two are my favorite. But I think I can go crutchless now."

"You don't have to be a tough guy." Willow rubbed his arm gently. "You were a hero tonight."

God, it was laughable, but he didn't laugh. If he had, he'd have been laughing at himself, not her. And then crying. The memory of pain was like knives in his flesh. He met her eyes, trying not to wallow too obviously in the grimness he felt creeping up on him. "I got caught and beaten up and had to be rescued by a vampire," he said simply. "Not feeling the hero here, Will."

"Xander--"

But he didn't want to hear it. Not this time. He had other business to attend to. Lucky for him Buffy had lingered behind with Dead Wood. "Look, I think I'm going to head to the shop, see Anya."

"Xander, it's," Willow glanced at her wrist, which was bare of any watch, "late...ish. I think." She looked at Dawn. "Isn't it?"

"It's night," Dawn confirmed. "Not so's you could tell."

"She'll be there. She's sleeping in the shop now, in the back."

"Oh." Strangely crestfallen, Willow still hesitated. "Should we--"

"You go on," Xander told them, keeping his bearing steady, his shoulders back. See the bright and shiny man. He no broken. "I'll be fine." The promise his eyes made was matched to his words. "I'm a sturdy little toaster."

Not to mention an excellent liar.

Stacks of crates and cartons crowded the interior, a storage maze illuminated by safety lights. Buffy knocked Spike's cap off, baring his hair, which absorbed the glow and cast it back brilliantly, a whiteness in her eyes, like the skin that was revealed as she ripped apart his jacket buttons. Palms sliding around his chest to meet behind him, she kissed him again and he kissed her back in that longing way of his, a licking fire inside her mouth.

"Buffy," he groaned.

And oh god, it was the wrong time and wrong place, bad and wrong altogether, but she could feel
her heat bleeding into him, her heart pounding against her ribs to be let out. He was shifting against her, one leg between hers, his hips moving as he gasped. She clasped him like a vine as he whirled her around, pushed her onto a crate, undid his trousers and her own. He was in her in a moment, one long thrust, fierce as a sword, cloak pouring across his shoulders to surround their bodies. He was a romantic novel taking her wholly in, and she could feel imaginary page edges fluttering as if thumbed, down in the folds of her body where he moved.

She arched into him and his face brushed hers and when he drew back, thin strands of her hair stretched between them, clinging to his cheek. His hips quickened, his lashes fell shut, and in the spidered light from above Buffy could see his face opening, shattering from the inside, in the way that sometimes made her believe there was more man to him than vampire.

"Buffy," he whispered like a prayer. "Buffy, love, oh love--"

It was so hard not to answer him, not to cry out, but she was afraid if she did, she wouldn't be able to stop. His name filled her throat and nearly choked her. She tightened around him, body striking hot beats against his, and felt a ribboning pleasure pulled out of her, and god, how long had it been, why had it been so long, all this darkness crashing down on their heads, sending them underground, suffocating them--

"Don't stop!" she cried out when he began to falter, the rhythm warning her of his release, and he tensed and shuddered and held fast inside her, obeying her command. His thrusts picked up speed and depth again, and she gasped as she clenched suddenly. It was as if every breath and sound had been sucked from her body; all she could do was ride the juddering heat of him and try not to shatter into a million pieces.

He rolled onto his back and took her astride him, laid out like a sacrifice to her pleasure, and she threw her head back and worked herself on him, forgetting the darkness as the light began to swallow her again and again. And when she could open her eyes, he was there beneath her, stricken to a fury of effort and will that wrote itself across his face, devouring her with his eyes like an animal. His uniform was in disarray, his cloak a crash of wings, his rank undone.

Eyes boring into hers, his jaw worked. "I answer--" he ground out, "--only to you." And then he arched, head tipping back and eyes closing, and showed her how.
The soldier staggered, dropping his newspaper and a handful of nuts before being hit again. He fell to the ground and a figure dragged him off the street into the alley, then through a discreet door into a storage bay. Inside, the soldier was dropped to the floor with no ceremony, and his hands bound behind him. The work done, his attacker backed away. The soldier groaned as his eyes opened to see two feet in muddy black boots retreating across the floor.

"Get up," said a voice.

Blinking to clear his eyes, the soldier heaved himself to his knees and then his feet. He swayed in place, focusing on his attacker until recognition set in. "You. You are free now--I do not fight."

Xander tipped his head to one side, bringing his bruised face into the light. He twitched the gun in his hand as if to say hello. "But I do."

"You have come to get your revenge, human?"

The demon's shoulders shifted as it tested its bonds. Its expression was wary but unafraid, and it was unclear if it would sneer or bargain. Xander watched it, his own face composed. "Revenge is such a...very appropriate word, actually."

"You will kill me, ka? Why bother--I merely do a job."

Xander's eyes took on a gleaming intensity. "What makes you think I don't?" A humorless laugh broke from him, cutting the air with the clear light sound of a cleaver on a chopping board. "You get vacation days with your job? Because I don't. No health plan either." His lips curled at the edges in a funny smile. The demon said nothing. A beat passed, and Xander's false lightness darkened. "Now I can take a beating. I'm very good at taking a beating." He licked a spot of dried blood of the corner of his mouth, continued to smile and stare into the demon's eyes. "You can see that, right? But here's the thing...you think you can just come into my town, my town, and spread your filth here? I've lived in this town my whole life, and I've been fighting demons for years, all year round. Spring, summer, fall and winter. No days off, no way to shut it off. And I'm sick of it. I'm sick of monsters walking around like men, of things like...you." He raised his pistol, which filled his hand like an upside-down question mark. "I think I deserve a little payback, what do you think?"

Without waiting for an answer he shot out one of the demon's kneecaps. It lurched and clutched its bleeding wound in one hand, its leg buckling but not quite failing. "Yeah, I think so," Xander mused. He tilted his hand, took aim, and shot the other knee out. The demon fell to the ground, rolling to its side with harsh cries.

Eyes fixed unwaveringly, almost blankly on this interesting display, Xander tucked the gun back into his belt and withdrew a large hunting knife. Its blade gleamed in the swinging overhead light. One edge of his lips quirked up.

"Now," he said gently. "Tell me if this hurts."
Well, this came remarkably fast. Like a premature baby? Maybe I should worry. I should wait a day and edit or something, I'm sure. But...that would sensible and semi-professional of me. I am cracked and decidedly amateur.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
The ancient radiator under the window was hissing to itself as it grudgingly released heat, just enough to fog over the glass panes above, partly masking a view of falling snow outside. A few flakes whirled from the blur onto the already heaped ledges, the rest vanishing to the ground far below. Next to the radiator, a narrow table along the wall was laid with tea things; a dented pot with matching sugar bowl and creamer, plates of iced cookies and rum balls, a fruitcake. Bits of holly and ribbon ran along the table's edge, tacked there with an amateur touch.

Choral music was playing at a subdued volume, its slow arrangement carrying a mournful tone that belied the lyrics. God rest ye merry gentlemen / Let nothing you dismay....

"It's shaping up to be quite a storm," observed the man who was loading his plate with tea-biscuits. An unraveled hole in the elbow of his green sweater revealed the white shirt beneath. "But it will have its benefits."

A frown of concentration on his face, Rupert Giles didn't look up from the letter he held when Quentin Travers came to stand next to him, tea cup and plate filling his hands. It was several moments before he raised his head to focus distractedly on the other man. "What? Oh, yes. If nothing else, our Glyndaca demon shall likely...retire for the season." He let the remark trail into silence, drawn back into a perusal of the message.

"What have you got there?" Travers asked officiously.

"I don't know. It's quite an odd communication from America. I might think it a joke, were it not for..." He hesitated, glasses catching the light as he tilted his head. "The tone."

Walking toward the hearth, Travers mused with no real depth of interest, "Who do you know in America?"

Giles followed, still peering at the letter, and absently took a seat in one of the wingback chairs while Travers stood warming his backside in front of the tiny fire. "No one. Well, Bellows is in New York at the moment, but this is from California." He cocked his head and stared off into space for a long moment, with the air of a man who can't place his finger on a niggling memory. "California. Why is that important?"
"You weren't at the last staff meeting, were you?"

Attention caught, Giles gave him a sharp look, half warning, half reminder. "I'm not staff any longer. I'm a consultant."

With a tiny snort, Travers moved away from the fire and sat down heavily across from Giles. He balanced his tea plate on one knee. "You're still welcome to join us. Might help you keep up to speed, as they say."

"Yes," said Giles with thin sarcasm, "God knows the velocity of change here might lead one to mistake it for the Autobahn."

"If you had attended our last staff meeting, Rupert, you'd know that we've tracked down our missing slayer in California."

Giles's eyes widened in startlement, and the letter was momentarily forgotten in hand. "You've found her? Faith?"

Travers grimaced. "For what good it does us. Apparently she's managed to land herself in jail. Prison, to be more exact. The watcher assigned to her--fellow named Wyndam-Pryce--turned up as well in Los Angeles. Working for a detective agency." The last two words were uttered as if he were speaking of some uniquely foreign and barbaric institution. His expression grew even more sour, and he shook his head. "We're trying to piece together what happened. This was badly bungled."

"Wyndam-Pryce," repeated Giles, the name having snagged his thoughts. "Wesley Wyndam-Pryce?"

"I believe so." Travers bit into a cookie, dribbling a few crumbs down his shirt-front.

Giles lifted his letter again, scanned it briefly, then read aloud, "'Please come, and if you can bring Wes and Angel and everyone in L.A. We need all the help we can get. Buffy needs you.... Love, Willow.'" He looked up, gazing at Travers over his glasses. "The letter requests help from me and the Council of Watchers to battle a race of demons called the 'Grauth,' who have taken over the town of Sunnydale, also know as the Hellmouth. The writer--Willow--also claims that there is another slayer. In Sunnydale." His voice lowered as he spoke to himself. "Why does that name sound so familiar?"

"Another slayer?" Travers laughed without much humor. "There can be but one. And much as I might wish for more, one is probably all that we can manage. Though god knows, we've done a poor enough job of that lately."

"You think it's just an odd coincidence, then. The letter a prank." Giles gazed at him steadily, a reluctant part of him curious to know what the other man thought. Travers was hidebound with tradition and inclined to dismiss anything that didn't fit his parochial and very British worldview. But sometimes he surprised one.

"Last week, one of our junior watchers hid a pixie in the ladies' lavatory. I won't mention what it did, but I'm sure your imagination can stretch to cover it." His cool eyes glinted as he allowed himself a smile. "Who else would know such details but another watcher, Rupert? Someone's having a bit of fun. Youth run wild."

"Perhaps you're right. There are certainly other things in here to suggest that." Giles considered the letter, then removed his glasses and hooked them over his jacket pocket. He refolded the letter and
tucked it away before gazing into the fire. "I was young once." His voice lapsed into musing. "Brazen and cocksure--quite certain I'd never make the mistakes my father had, or his father before him. I would drive my own life, and it would be quite a sporty little number. Radio playing catchy tunes. It seems so long ago now...." A sense of nostalgia and passing sadness touched him, stirred by the quiet music of *Silent Night* and crackling flames. The corners of his mouth tipped into a faintly bitter smile. "I thought, when I finally deigned to fulfill my promise, that at least my destiny would be a grand one. Tragic but somehow meaningful." He dragged his glance from the fire, looked at Travers with ironical eyes. "I thought I might have my own slayer, you know. And now it's too late."

Travers met his eyes forthrightly, not flinching. If there was one thing to be said about him, he never minced words. He wasn't a kind man, and kindness didn't surface now. "It is too late. But you can still be of help, Rupert."

"Can I?" Giles rested his head against the back of the chair. "I wonder."

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It was just a knife, thought Xander, as he studied the gleaming blade, turning it between his hands to catch the light. It was a clean knife that showed no signs of its recent use. A bloodless knife. But sharp. When he tested it against his thumb, it drew his own blood to the surface. He considered his spilled blood--life juice, freshly squeezed--then licked it from his skin. You got to know the taste of your own blood over the years and it didn't make you a creepy vampire when you had a nip.

The demon's blood had been red, too. That seemed wrong. It should have been a different color, easily distinguished from human.

Feeling a shaking in his hands, Xander deliberately steadied them on the crate and slid the knife blade under its top, levering it open with a creaking give of nails. His head turned as his mother entered the kitchen and came to stand next to him. While upstairs, she'd gotten dressed, putting on a set of light-colored sportswear, against which her signum was a harsh red brand, more visible than his own; she'd also taken the time to brush the sleep-tangles from her hair and dab on lipstick. His visit seemed to have restored some sense of normality to her, and he felt oddly guilty for not having come by sooner. He'd sent word through Anya that he was okay, but even so his mother had cried when he arrived, hugged him like crazy as if she'd feared him dead. Faint traces of tears were still visible around her puffy eyes.

"It's so thoughtful of you," she said, as if he were no more than an acquaintance, someone who'd brought by an unexpected gift and deserved her politeness. She gazed at the crate instead of him, a touch of familiar vacancy in her expression. "It's been hard to get things at the store--and the lines go around the block now."

"Well, there's not much." Xander laid the lid aside and poked around inside. "Flour, cookies, soup." Not much of a Christmas present. He hadn't even packed everything; Willow had tucked some extra goodies in before he sealed it up. But he'd made sure to include one thing. He found the pistol and pulled it out, then unwrapped it from its towel. "Gun," he said redundantly. His mother's eyes held confusion and alarm, but he held the weapon out, letting her get a good look.

"Oh, Xander. What would I--I don't know--"

"Take it. Just in case." He demonstrated the basics, handling the cold heavy metal with a fresh
degree of intimacy he couldn't hide from her. "Flick the safety off, point it, pull the trigger." He handed it to her. "Here. Keep it close. Somewhere you can get to it fast if you need to."

Her face was dubious but she took the weapon, her hand dipping a little as its weight surprised her. She held it in both hands then, with the gingeriness of distrust, and didn't seem to know what to do with it until Xander, taking pity on her, reclaimed it. "I'll just put it away for now," he said, stashing it in one of the kitchen drawers. When he turned back, he found himself pinned by her keen and desperate gaze.

"What's happening?" she asked, and she didn't have to be specific. He knew what she meant. But it was the kind of question that even deities might have a hard time answering, and he was a far cry from that. "These things," she went on, every word reaching for something she didn't understand. "What are they?"

"Demons, mom." Seven years and he'd never had the chance to say that. He'd thought about it a thousand times, though, so it felt as if the inevitable were finally happening. The hard, shiny light of the kitchen made the shadows very real. "They're demons. Vampires, monsters, things that go bump in the night." He held her eyes. "I've been fighting them for years."

His revelation didn't seem to sink in. "But where do they come from?"

"They come from hell. This is the Hellmouth--good old Sunnydale, California. It's like a vacation spot for evil."

"All this time," his mother said, sitting down on one of the faux colonial chairs that made up their dinette set. "The black eyes, and the limping--that time your arm was broken. We thought you just got picked on a lot. That's what you said. Brawls in school."

"Well, they were in school," he assured her. "But the brawls were with demons. Most of them."

"Your father was always so disappointed in you, Xander. And you let him think--let us think--" She broke off, eyes finishing with a look that was tired, old and wounded.

Xander could feel his entire adolescence expanding inside him like an accordion, all those years and fights and stony silences, and he squeezed it back down. "I know. I'm sorry."

"You could stay with us now." There was an almost plaintive note in her voice. Xander looked at the top of her head, noticing that her roots were showing, and that they were grey. He could feel his attachment to her, and to the house itself, which was an extension of their lives. He'd left long ago, though, and she knew it--and the house knew it. The wooden surface of the dinette table used to be glossy, but now held a layer of dust, visible among the permanent place mats. Everything looked untouched and unregarded: the display cabinet of china plates, the stiff curtains, the extra chairs that sat unused in the corners because they never had guests. Dinners in this room had been quietly miserable, and he couldn't imagine coming back. It would hurt her if he told her that living in the tunnels and sewers was preferable to this.

"I can't," he said. "I've got this whole rebel forces lifestyle thing going on."

She sort of nodded, sort of didn't. "You're probably safer in hiding." He couldn't tell if this was another subtle accusation, or concern for him, or both. The language of mothers was complex and hard to translate. "I just don't know what to do with myself these days," she went on after a pause. "There's not much call for real estate sales right now. They just take what they want, you know. Move in, kick families out. Property values will never be the same."
"Yeah," he said, because what else could you say to that?

"They said we could keep our house. Your father's job, you know." She managed a weak and slightly bitter smile. "He's useful. He's directing a project to build a new power system."

Attention sharpening, Xander feigned indifference. "Oh? For what?"

"Mines," she said as if surprised he didn't already know. "The labor mines."

You couldn't ask for a chamber roomier than the former Initiative headquarters, but in recent days it had begun to take on a claustrophobic atmosphere to Buffy. With the sleeping bags and crates and makeshift partitions it was beginning to resemble a sprawling slumber party, and there were at least five too many kids hanging about at all hours, scrapping restively with each other, when they weren't whining for the microwave popcorn of days gone by. It was still hard finding them things to do; Buffy hadn't yet reconciled herself to putting them on the front lines. But she had to think of something soon; another few days of marathon Monopoly and they'd all go mental.

Plus, the closer Christmas got, the more depressed and irritable everyone seemed to grow. As holidays went, it was fa la la la la lame. Earlier in the day they'd dragged in a tiny tree from the campus grounds and decorated its thinning, lopsided body with tinfoil ornaments and yarn. As she threaded her way past it now, she couldn't help but notice how much the thing resembled the mangy fir of a Charlie Brown Christmas. If she'd felt more festive, she might have cajoled the kids to deck the halls, so that the tree didn't look so alone. Poor droopy little tree. But in all honesty, it wasn't so much a lack of holiday cheer that stopped her, but an unwillingness to stir up a hornet's nest of helpful teenagers who couldn't cut a deck of cards without finding ten new things to argue about.

Ignoring the raised voices from across the room, she joined Willow in the north corner, which they'd established as a base of operations. Maps hung on the walls, weapons lay in neat stacks, and the table was covered with spell materials. At the moment, it was mostly base, with not much in the way of operations, but that was going to change.

Willow had cleared a space on the table and spread some newspapers on its surface. She was rooting around inside a dead frog, blood on her fingers as she plucked out its innards. A pile of soggy organs lay next to it on the paper, and nearby were additional corpses of small mammals and one slightly squashed garter snake. Buffy, more squeamish than befitted a slayer, tried not to observe the proceedings as she took a seat.

"How goes magic, the gathering?"

"It's been a while since I harvested fresh ingredients." Willow made a tiny face. "I'm thinking that Anya's philosophy of capitalism has its merits. Mass production, yay."

Buffy nodded. "Guts should come dried, in tidy boxes." Her gaze was drawn to the dissection before veering off again. "What's this?" she asked, catching sight of a small black book and picking it up. It looked familiar, and a guilty expression from Willow met her question.

"It's Avery Foss's notebook, the one you took from him. I, um, broke the code. I thought I'd take another look through it, see if there was anything useful."
"Is there?" Buffy kept her voice neutral. She was no longer the blamey Buffy. Any argument over whether or not Willow should have shared her visions was moot now. The mootest. And if Willow had kept more from her, she didn't want to know.

"Not really. Most of it's notes on the invasion plans, and that's a done deal." Willow dropped a tiny heart onto the paper with a soft, damp plop. "We need new sources of intel."

A tiny smile cracked Buffy's face. "Intel? That's very double-oh Willow." She set the notebook aside and picked up a blood-red taper, fiddling with the wick.

Willow's face remained serious. "I've been thinking of alternatives. We could try breaking into Grauth records again and sure, that might get us some information--if we know what to look for and where." She flicked a gaze at Buffy. "Or we could go straight to the source."

"The mall?" Buffy said blankly.

"The Grauth. We capture some and interrogate them." She gestured at the items on the table with one bloodied hand; bagged herbs, dislocated bones, corpses. "I have all the ingredients for a truth spell. And if that doesn't work...there are other methods."

Her friend's very reasonable tone of voice sent a little chill through Buffy. "That's...an idea," she said carefully, hesitating over how to answer this. She didn't have any huge objections ready and it just might come to that, but something made her hedge. "You know who else has information, though." She messaged the name, unspoken, with her eyes.

Willow's lip curled, and Buffy could tell she'd been expecting this suggestion. "And we can trust him, because...?"

"Because he answers to me," she said quietly, feeling the admission send a shivery ache through her, and a twinge that was the memory of pleasure.

"Okay," Willow said with unexpected capitulation. "We'll talk to him then. See what he's got for us." It was hard to read her face; the curves of her cheeks and frets of her lashes had once held such a powerful innocence that her features still retained its traces, shining brightly even when her thoughts might be dark, her hands drenched in blood.

"I'll set it up," said Buffy.

Willow smiled back and rubbed absently at her cheek, leaving a stripe of blood like Indian war-paint on her skin. Then she reached down on the floor beside her and straightened back up with a rabbit trembling and twitching in the nest of her arms. "That's good," she murmured, petting its fur, her own red hair swinging loosely past her face as she dipped her head. Buffy couldn't tell if she were talking to the rabbit or to her. "We'll just have a nice talk, all calm and cozy. Shhhh."

The crack of its neck breaking was quicker than the tick of a clock, and as quiet.

Anya was singing. She would have assured anyone who asked that she wasn't happy. No such politically incorrect emotion would be harbored here, no sir, but even so the holiday spirit had crept in like an imp and taken up shop behind her breastbone. And there was no one to see her, so why not dance lightly around as she dusted the shelves? Who would a little recreational trilling
harm? No one, that's who.

"Strings of street lights, even stop lights, blink a bright red and green, as the shoppers rush home with their treasures." Dust, dust, glissade. "Hear the snow crunch, see the kids bunch, this is Santa's big scene--" Sur le pointe! "And above all this bustle, you'll hear--" Twirl, petit allegro, little steps from shelves to table. "Silver bells, silver bells, it's Christmas time in the city. Ring-a-ling, hear them sing, soon it will be--yeoohh! Oh, molasses!" Gasping, she jumped at the sudden wall of curious vampire blocking her path, then whacked Spike's cap with her feather duster. "Don't sneak up on me like that with your little cat feet!"

"Bell rang when I came in," he pointed out dryly.

"I thought that was in my head. Part of the carol." She frowned, still recovering from her shock. "I've never really been the same since that whole song-and-dance calamity back in ought one." She gave it its due, like a hurricane.

"Yeah. Must admit, Broadway musicals have left me a bit cold since then." He removed his cap, plucked a pink feather from the trim and let it drift to the floor. "So why'm I here? Got your message. Some kid knocked me up before I'd even had my brekkie. Where'd you find him, anyway? Little biter wouldn't hand over the note till I'd tipped him."

"Oh, there are children all over," Anya waved a hand. "Running loose in the streets. Parents in the internment camps. They're calling them detention camps, but I think matters are a little more permanent than that--don't you?" She fixed him with a steely gaze.

"I think we both know that as camps go, they could be worse," Spike said. His eyes were blue and imperturbable, and he almost sounded sincere. Like an authentic human. Anya wondered how he did that. She tried so hard herself to fashion herself after appropriate cultural role models like Monica Geller and that one girl on *Charmed* with the good hair, and yet from the looks on the faces of Xander and his friends, she never got it quite right. But Spike, soulless and sans pulse, pulled it off, making her almost forget he was a vampire for seconds at a time. Not that Buffy's friends liked him any better, of course, so his great artistry or mimicry or whatever you wanted to call it didn't do him a hell of a lot of good.

Forgiving him his facade of humanity with good grace, she nodded. "I suppose you're right." She paused thoughtfully. "Why do you suppose they're keeping us alive? I'm speaking of the human 'us' now," she clarified.

"Funny you should mention. I've been looking into that, and a few other things." He squinted around the shop as if he believed someone might be listening to their conversation, but she could tell it was just restless habit. "Got to get ahold of Buffy."

"Well, that's fortuitous. She wants to see you too."

He perked right up. "She does?" A second later that honest need was hidden away, and a sly smirk teased the edges of his mouth. "Guess she wants takin' out for another ride. Gotta keep the engine in racing trim."

Anya folded her arms. "Yes, do tell her that when you see her. Women appreciate car metaphors about their sexual parts. She'll be revving so fast, she'll leave skid marks when she pulls away."

"You're quite the vixen today yourself," Spike said, arching his brows. "The mechanic drop by your garage last night? Have a poke about under the bonnet...?" He ran his gloved finger along the neckline of her dress.
"Stop that!" She slapped his hand away. "My god, I think you'd flirt with a block of wood or a, a Feznik demon. Or other things equally inanimate and grotesque." She touched her hair lightly to make sure it remained coiffed.

The vampire grinned. "Bit harsh on yourself, aren't you, ducks? You're an attractive vehicle. You ever toss over that great wazzok you're latched to, you'd find plenty of punters clustering around right quick. Know one fellow who'd head the queue."

"Speak American," she complained, busying herself dusting a display of guardian angel pins, two ninety-nine a head. "What are you talking about?"

"Sordicov's taken a shine to you," Spike said, picking up a bundle of extra-strength cleansing sage and sniffing it like a bouquet, with a faint grimace. He eyed her intently over the top of the sticks, a rather boyish peep. "Says he'd like to get to know you better."

"Everyone wants to get to know me better," Anya said peevishly, ignoring the implications of his remark the way one might ignore an anvil on one's foot. "I'm very popular with the demon social set these days."

"Just like old times for you, then."

"Oh, I was never popular before," she confessed, knowing it was safe, because he would neither understand nor care about her problems. "All work, no play. I never fit in anywhere." She stared at the gilded angels on their stand (cheap gimcrack that she wouldn't even be selling if not for the heavy mark-up, and how sad was that?), the unwanted realization troubling her. "I still don't. I have this shop and I run it well, but if I closed up tomorrow, another proprietor would just come along and take my place. One always does. And if I were dead, Xander would be sad for a while, but he'd cry on Buffy's shoulder and maybe she'd take pity on him and they'd get married, because oh, there's no curse on her. Bitterness tinged her voice now, and she was rambling to herself without any awareness of Spike's presence. "And they'd have loads of fat babies, and they'd name one after me, and," she sniffled, "and once in a while they'd pull out the photo album and point to a picture of me--one of the really terrible ones where my face is funny-looking and I've got a zit--and they'd say, 'There's your Aunt Anya, she was run over by a bus one day when she was making a deposit, how tragic. She died a spinster, you know.'"

"What?" she snapped.

"You're dribbling," he said, and ran his thumb gently across her cheek, brushing away a tear.

"I hate when men are nice," she said angrily. "It defies all natural law. And you, you're not nice. You're never nice. So stop it. It's--it's gross and wrong." She was brandishing the feather duster like a weapon, her fist white-knuckled around its handle, and he took it away and gathered her close and came close, and she thought he might kiss her mouth, and for a moment he looked as if he were thinking about it, but instead he kissed her forehead with unexpected kindness and a very peculiar expression, which was precisely when Xander came from the street into the shop to discover them.

They jumped apart and Anya straightened her dress, which didn't need straightening. "Xander!"

"Now listen," Spike began warningly before Xander said anything. "She was just havin' a cry--" He caught sight of the feather duster he was waving and tossed it aside. "--and I was just being nice. That's all. Don't even know why. Must've been something I ate." A funny spasm crossed his face when he realized what he'd said. "Er, scratch that."

"Yes," broke in Anya, "and I told him to stop being nice, I swear, but he went right ahead--if you
have to kill him, please don't do it in the shop!" She pleaded with hands clasped together, feeling as
if dozens of loose anxieties had suddenly knit themselves together in one big tangle.
A long beat passed, during which Xander stared at Spike. "I'm not going to kill him," he said
finally, his voice strangely subdued and his face flat and absent, the way he sometimes looked
when he hadn't slept well or had just visited his father. "You were crying. He was nicing. I get it."
He focused on her. "Why were you crying?"
"Wait, you're not jealous and homicidal?" The wrongness of his reaction offended her. "What's the
matter with you? Are you sick?"
"Yeah." Xander tipped up a crooked half-smile. "Must be something I ate."

Out in the street, they walked together past the fruit and coffee stalls and the newsies hawking the
latest hot-press headlines of fabricated victories, while demons in pork-pie hats bustled by on their
way to stolen offices. In Spike's company, Xander got more second glances than he did when
traveling alone. The speculative eyes of strangers assessed him from boots to bare head, humans
dismissing him with stonily disguised contempt or even hatred, non-humans pegging his purpose in
ways he could imagine all too well.
"She's crying a lot these days," he commented to Spike, his conversation on Anya, his thoughts
elsewhere, circling a darker spot like vultures round a corpse.
"You've got to expect that," Spike said, lighting a cigarette. "What with her condition and all."
Xander blinked at him, baffled. "Her what?"
"Bun in the oven. Makes women come over all weepy. Doubt she'll be herself until she pops the
tyke out. Course then she'll be a mum--that's when you really want to be scared, mate. Give me a
choice 'tween fighting a raging hellbeast and some ticked-off mama bear, and I'll--"
"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Xander interrupted. "Anya's pregnant?" He stopped in the middle of the
sidewalk, aghast. "Oh my god. Oh my--oh, wait." He relaxed, remembering the night in the bar
when they'd run into Spike. "Anya's not pregnant. She was just making that up."
Spike looked annoyed. "If that bird gets any crazier when she is carrying, you're in a lot of trouble."
"I know." Xander tucked his hands in the pockets of his jacket, felt the shape of his knife in its
sheathe. A vampire in game face hurriedly shoved between him and Spike, displaying no interest in
either of them, simply on its way somewhere, keeping whatever appointment a young vampire
professional might have. It wore a woolen coat and a long green scarf wound around its neck, and
was carrying a briefcase tucked under its arm. They both watched it go for a moment, and Xander
wondered if Spike's thoughts mirrored his own. Was he thinking of stalking and killing, regretting
the ripe peach of a missed opportunity; did he wish for simpler times?
"Tragic what the world's come to," Spike mused, lifting his cigarette to his lips and staring after the
vamp. "Children of the night, getting jobs. Getting respectable. Next thing you know we'll be
opening sweet shops and running for congress."
Oh god, how he wished for simpler times.


"Two guys walk into a bar," Willow said in a dry little tone of voice. Buffy looked at her across the booth and waited for the punchline, then realized her friend was staring toward the entrance.

She turned to see Spike and Xander standing just inside the door as it swung shut behind them. A palpable wave of hush and mutters swept across the room as the bar's patrons noticed Spike. He stood out like a shiny new soldier in a box of broken toys, his jet-black uniform crisp and expensive, from his cloak to his polished boots; even the little bits of red and silver trim looked like fresh paint. The bar, shabby but unremarkable before, was made seedier by the contrast of his presence, and it struck Buffy how differently he carried himself now. Before, he would have blended in, his leather coat and old boots as worn as the weathered boards, just a skeevy vamp making himself home among the other lost souls. And sure he would have strutted and picked fights, building himself a rep, but now...now he didn't have to try at all.

"I'm thinking it maybe wasn't such a good idea to meet here," Buffy said, looking at the restive, grumbly crowd of demons and humans. Some were getting up and slinking out; others huddled over their drinks, trying not to be noticed and making themselves all the more obvious.

The men joined them at the table, taking seats. Uncomfortably, Buffy slid over to make room for Spike. He took up a lot more space than he used to, what with the big bat-cape and all. His hands, hidden in black leather gloves, rested against the carved and splintered table as if waiting for something to play with--a drink, a knife, a swizzle stick.

"Whiskey," he said to the waitress who edged up to take their order. He glanced at the drinks in front of Buffy and Willow. "Beer for the lad," he added.

*The lad?* Buffy thought. *The hell?*

"I don't want anything," Xander said.

"Beer," Spike repeated, and the waitress left. He looked at Xander critically. "You could use topping up." Wow, thought Buffy, exchanging a look with Willow that involved the surreptitious arching of brows. *Check out the almost-friendly vibe,* her look said. It was kind of...well, the word 'disturbing' came to mind. And Spike was eyeing her now. "Take it this is neutral ground, Slayer? Not exactly five-star, is it."

She raised one shoulder. "Any'a's black-market buddy told me about it. I thought it would be low-profile. Unfortunately, you're not."

The drinks came in record speed, and the waitress whisked herself off again, leaving them to an awkward group silence that Willow broke first. "Before we start, there's something we need to clear up." Even lost in an oversized corduroy jacket and wearing the signum of their oppressors, she gave off a slightly menacing air. That hard tone was for Spike, who looked guardedly at her in return.

"What's that?"

"I don't trust you."

"There's a shocker."
"So you're going to prove yourself."

Buffy tensed. "Okay, not something we discussed, Will."

Willow had removed a small leather bag from her pocket and was loosening its drawstring. "Don't worry. It's not painful...if he's honest." She swirled her finger in the bag, stirring a sparkly red flare to life around its mouth. "I need a token," she told Spike. "Something you've touched, something you keep on you."

After a moment in which no one said anything and Buffy couldn't think of a good reason to stop this, Spike reached into a jacket pocket and withdrew something silver. She'd thought it would be his lighter, but when he unclasped his hand and let the item dangle, she saw it was a cross on a chain. It lay across his fingers, swinging. Willow seemed briefly nonplussed, her lips parting in surprise, then regained composure and flicked a puff of red powder across the cross. It twisted around the metal in a double helix and then seemed to be absorbed.

"And now?" Spike said with cold civility, eyes never leaving Willow.

"Are you betraying us?" she asked, watching the cross.

"No."

"Are you killing humans?"

A deep breath, and then: "No."

"Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" asked Xander. The others looked at him, and he cleared his throat. "Sorry. Just trying to lighten the mood."

"Okay," Willow said. Her face was composed as she studied Spike's, and if her acceptance was grudging, she hid it well. "I guess we trust you. For now."

A knot of tension in Buffy eased and under cover of the table, she lightly touched Spike's leg, resting her fingers there before withdrawing them. He made no sign at this caress, but his own stiffness relaxed slightly. He put the cross away and settled back in his seat, one hand curling around his glass. After a collective hesitation, Spike directed a gaze out across the bar room, scanning it as if looking for a change of subject. "'S like old home night for losers and tossers," he said, the edge in his voice indicating he was not at all surprised. "Take a good look, kiddies. These are the dispossessed, the new underclass." He toasted the room, then drank.

Annoyance touched Willow's expression, but when she spoke her voice was milder than it had been in weeks past. "In case you didn't notice, those are mostly your kind out there. Demony and possessed. The dis are sitting right here."

Training his sharp gaze on her, Spike lowered his voice and said, "You want the stories that aren't reaching the papers, right? Well, I'm telling you: it's not just humans getting it in the shorts. The new landlords have plans for everyone."

"What kind of plans?" Xander asked warily.

"Bring the lower races into line. Kill the ones that don't follow or fit into their program."

"And where are vampires on that food chain?" Xander's face was set into mocking lines, though his voice lacked its usual energy.
"Depends." Spike tipped his head, acknowledging one of the unspoken truths of the Hellmouth. "Not all vamps are created equal."

Buffy had always wondered about that, but right now she wasn't really interested in discussing the creation theory of vampires. "I don't care what happens to demons," she broke in. "I have only one priority, and that's keeping the human race from becoming fertilizer for Grauth flower gardens."

The imagery she'd used was blunt and sobering, and there was a moment of silence before Spike said carefully, "You might want to consider the benefits of making allies then, Slayer."

Her cheeks heated. There was nothing like having Spike point out strategic oversights to make her feel ten years younger and stupider, the blow-pop sucking ditz she used to be instead of the girl general she styled herself as now, Sunnydale's answer to Joan of Arc.

Even worse was when Xander added, "He has a point." He didn't sound pleased about it. In fact, he sounded horrified and looked queasy, and gave a cracked little laugh after he spoke.

"I won't rule it out," she allowed, "but right now we need information more than we need allies."

She was speaking to Spike, but her gaze was drawn to Xander, who'd rested his head in both hands and was scrubbing his fingers through his hairline with small but brutal-looking motions. "Xander, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said to the table, then dragged himself upright as he realized he'd gained their attention. His face had paled, highlighting shadows under his eyes that Buffy hadn't noticed before. "Headache."

"What else do you know?" Willow said, directing the conversation back to Spike, her tone implying he should come up with something more useful.

He looked from Xander to her. "Seen our friend Willy a couple of times. He's comin' up in the world. Apparently some info made its way to the right people's ears, and he earned himself a line of credit. Opened a nightclub over on Sierra. Something else too--" He paused for dramatic effect, removing his gloves to light a cigarette. "He's getting the treatment."

"What," said Buffy, "like a permanent wave?" And okay, why were they looking at her like that? Didn't they recognize sarcasm? She wasn't that blonde.

"No, like a permanent makeover from human to demon. Special reward for friends of the state. Your pal Foss was on the same step plan. 'S done with injections or something."

Willow looked sickened, her brows lowering in a frown and her lips parting as if she were tasting something unpleasant. "They're turning them into Grauth? They can't do that. It doesn't work like that!" She turned her gaze to Buffy, seeking an arbiter for her argument. "You can't give someone a shot and say, poof, you're a demon."

"Why not?" Buffy wondered. "We've seen stranger."

"Demons and humans have different natures. It's not genetic or even like an infection--it's elemental."

"What about that time I caught the aspect-of-the-demon thingy? Wasn't that like an infection?" She honestly didn't think it sounded so far-fetched, but Willow seemed stubbornly upset by the idea. Xander appeared just as staggered, but wordlessly so. "Maybe that's what the treatment is. A bunch of magicky elements, like vitamin shots."
"That's crazy," Willow said, a bit more loudly. She was giving off anger vibes now, but Buffy could tell they weren't directed at her.

"So, getting turned into a demon is a reward." Xander, slouching in his seat, shook his head at the prospect. "What's the punishment?"

It was clearly a rhetorical question, but Spike answered, "That would be the detention camps. And the labor mines."

"We've been hearing about those," Buffy said, imagination dwelling unwillingly on the bleak scenes the words conjured, a nightmare courtesy of Hollywood: people crammed into cold bare rooms, hungry, dressed in rags. Mud and barking guard dogs and barbed wire. Forcing herself to concentrate on the more immediate present, she asked, "Any idea what they're mining?"

"No," Spike admitted. "Very hush-hush, whatever it is."

"Info not fit for a mere captain, huh?" Buffy smiled with her eyes, and he glinted dryly back for one shared moment of communication.

"'Fraid not," he said.

"Hey, Slayer," said a reedy feminine voice. Buffy looked up to see a purple newt standing at the end of the table. It wore a poncho and several pounds of beaded bling-bling, and smelled so powerfully of weed, Buffy thought she might be getting a contact high from proximity alone. The creature swayed slightly and tried to bring its glassy eyes into focus, while behind it a speckled companion lizard in tasseled sombrero and overalls flashed them the peace sign.

"Hellllllooo," Buffy replied, driving every ounce of doubt she owned into that single syllable. A hazy recollection surfaced of having come across the demons before, but being a slayer was like being a movie star: more people remembered meeting you than you remembered them. Still, she seemed to recall they'd been eager for the new age to dawn in Sunnydale. She wondered how they liked it now that dawn was here.

"So, hey, look," said the newt. "We're not, like, best buds or anything, but you know people, right?"

"Several. Some of them at this very table."

"See?" the newt said over its shoulder. "I told you, man. She's cool." Liquid eyes fixed on Buffy again. "So, like...we're trying to hitch a ride out of town, but no one's got wheels. You need this permit for a car and it's...." She lost the trail of her thought, then recaptured it with a pounce of outrage: "It's wack!" Her tail flickered behind her in punctuation.

"Wack," repeated Buffy.

"Exactly." Newt expressed this word in amazement, as if Buffy had just shared satori. "But you have permits and stuff, 'cause you know...you're the Slayer."

Buffy's brows couldn't have climbed any higher up her forehead without surgical intervention. She wouldn't have thought it was physically possible to get that stoned or that stupid, but here was walking evidence. "Uh huh. I'm a real big wheel around here now that the hell demons have taken over."

"Fantastic!" Newt exclaimed, with pathetic enthusiasm. Then its eyes clouded. "But we don't have any money, so it'd just be like...karma."
"Right. Karma." Absolutely.

"Karma chameleon," Xander said, staring at the demon as if seeing an apparition from his own occasionally bong-shattered past.

"Dude," said the speckled demon suddenly, from behind Newt. He nodded with affinity and pumped a fist of solidarity at Xander. Xander's eyes remained big and fascinated.

"Look," Buffy said, finally dredging up a thimble of pity for her deluded petitioner. "I can't help you. There's no way out of the Hellmouth right now. You should just find a place to hole up and ride this out." She couldn't tell if she was getting through. "Capisce?"

Newt's tail twitched. "If you don't wanna help out a sister, you could just say so. No need to be all high-hat." Buffy opened her mouth, but Newt blew on: "C'mon, Derek." Derek? "Might as well leave Queenie to her court." Her patter lowered to a mumble as she shuffled off with Derek in tow.

"Know a vamp with a Bug, lives at the beach, owes me a favor..."

Everyone at the table watched the lizards leave, and a silence lingered in their wake until Willow drew up her lower lip in a thoughtful nibble and said, "Does anyone else have the munchies?"

If Lieutenant Illamar Clude had made a fresh pot of coffee on time, he never would have seen the vampire.

The New Grauth Reich was not entirely what Clude had expected. He had been commissioned a lieutenant back when his people couldn't reach the surface, when he'd been one of the few to walk the Earth, preserving their culture until the time of destiny, when the Grauth would return and reclaim their birthright. He'd worked hard, taken all doctrine on faith, been a leader to his cell. He'd worked with humans--had to, because humans could tolerate the sun, and his people couldn't--but even so he hadn't complained. He'd known that when the New Reich arrived, he would be justly rewarded. He was a lieutenant, after all. A respectable rank. Or so he'd been led to believe.

Occupation had changed things. Within days, he'd learned that his rank was considered nominal only. Lacking combat experience and formal army training, he was bound by regulations which prevented him from joining the ranks of soldiers charged with defending the Reich. His newly assigned duties were purely administrative--in truth, he was little more than a glorified secretary. He wore the uniform of deskside staff and reported to a surly, dyspeptic career captain, who in turn answered up a chain of command that effectively ended in Colonel Liyoge. This captain had decided that Clude's experience on Earth suited him to the task of running to the market every morning for pears and chocolate, and making pot after pot of Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee, a substance whose days were numbered, given that all imports were cut off by the Civic Defense Barrier. Of course, Clude hadn't bothered to tell the man this yet.

This afternoon he'd failed to make the three o'clock pot at three o'clock, having had the temerity to perform, instead, actual work. No more than typing reports, but that was something. He was good at reports. That was part of his problem, apparently. He'd impressed his superiors so well with his reports on the good citizens of Sunnydale that he'd earned himself an eternal place in the bowels of bureaucracy. And today, while typing, he forgot to brew a fresh pot of his superior's cultivated addiction. This had resulted in a severe dressing-down that lasted forty-five minutes, time Clude felt could have been better spent actually *making* the coffee his captain desired, as well as finishing
up his documentation of weekly recruitment and attrition statistics.

Burning furiously from the reprimand, Clude had left the office on the dot of five, rather than staying late as was his wont. Why make extra effort when it would only go unrecognized--when making *coffee* was the only measure by which one's worth was judged? It was grotesquely unfair, what he'd come to, after all the dedicated service he'd given, and he was musing deeply and still smarting with the injustice when he looked up and saw the vampire coming out of a drab windowless bar in the Lower Quarter, where the lesser breeds of demons--what Grauth called *dreffa*--resided.

It was Spike, a.k.a. William the Bloody, a.k.a. Captain William Aurelius, the new darling of the Special Forces. Clude recognized him easily. He'd recruited the man personally, after all, and had been following his exploits in the press with bitter resentment. No more than a single rung above Clude on the ladder of rank, and no formal army training *there* either, and yet Captain Aurelius was invested with the full authority of a combat officer. And he was not even Grauth, but a vampire.

He did wear the uniform of their kind, however. Which was why Clude found it so interesting that the vampire was leaving a *dreffa* club in the company of the slayer and two other humans. They parted ways quickly, but their glances and nods could not be mistaken for anything other than partnership. Clude smiled unpleasantly as he hung back behind a dumpster and watched the vampire walk away, cloak swirling behind him, the human male by his side. The slayer was supposed to be dead. She'd been on one list; Spike on another. Names on those lists didn't mix, didn't mingle, didn't meet in dark bars. Or if they did, it meant...something very inappropriate.

Clude didn't need to follow Spike. He knew where the vampire lived; in tony officer's quarters reserved for the Reich's best and brightest. But the slayer--it would be prudent to follow her, see what she called home these days.

He fell silently into step, trailing her with care, close enough to track her golden head cleaving the shadows and far enough back to avoid her attention. He didn't want to lose her. She was his ticket out of the dull offices of Recruitment and into a field position--perhaps even Intelligence.

It was true what humans said. The only good was knowledge, and ignorance the only evil.

"There sure were a lot of sad sacks in that bar," Willow commented as she and Buffy skirted the pond in Stickler Park. "Some of them were pretty sack-like to begin with, but this occupation is laying everyone low."

"I thought you were all, 'dis here, possessed there.' You think Spike's right, we should ally with demons now?"

Willow lifted her shoulders, bodily struggling with the problem. "I don't know. We're up against something bigger than we've ever faced before. Maybe it's too big for just us."

"I know there are good demons," Buffy said. "Or at least, not-entirely-bad ones. But the way things are right now, we might not be able to tell which are which. Or worse, what if it's the bad ones we'd have to trust? I don't think I'm ready to take that risk with our lives."

"It seems like it used to be easier to tell the good guys from the bad," Willow acknowledged. "But
you know, even back in the day when the Initiative was around--"

Buffy touched Willow's hand and the other woman fell silent, giving her a sidelong look. "I think we're being followed," Buffy said quietly. The waves were lapping at the embankment and the path lights made tiny pools in the darkness, and like a ripple from her own steps she could hear other footfalls behind her.

Without turning her head or breaking stride, Willow noted, "The tunnel entrance is just across the bridge."

"Yeah. So I'm thinking we should see who our shadow is--now." Abruptly, Buffy stopped and whirled into a defensive posture, half expecting a bullet or bolt to come flying out of the night. Down the path a uniformed figure paused under a lamp, too distant for Buffy to make out his features, then broke and ran away, boots thudding on the walk without any further attempt at concealment. Her only certainty was that he was Grauth, and she would have given chase, if she'd had any idea what to do with him when she caught up.

"Aren't you going to go after him?" Willow asked.

"No. Not here. I don't want to attract attention. Besides," she said as they turned and walked on, "he didn't have a chance to find out anything important."

Back at the Initiative--Buffy never really stopped thinking of it like that--they gathered the others into conference mode and outlined their plans. It felt good to have plans, which along with the maps helped her feel she was coming to grips on things. "We're going to do some recon," she said. "We know the Grauth have set up detention camps. They've got a whole town's worth of forced labor, and they're mining something out by Mount Siliyik."

Dawn perked up, enthused by knowledge and the chance to be exposition girl. "Oh, that's the glowy place we saw in the locator spell."

"Right." Buffy sat up straight at the head of the table, trying to inject an air of authority and professionalism into proceedings that were at risk of resembling an after-school club meeting. The youth of her audience made her nervous, more for their sake than her own. Kerry was nibbling a Twinkie she'd found god knows where, and sitting too close for Buffy's comfort to Marcos, providing a candid illustration of how premature teen sex could destroy your sense of personal space and public restraint. "We need to find out what's going on out there," she went on. "What their operation is."

"If that's where the portal opened, it's no coincidence," Willow said. "It's a place of power."

"Funny we've never had any trouble there before." Tara looked around questioningly. "Not that I can remember."

Willow lifted one shoulder. "I guess it was dormant."

As the conversation threatened to veer into unhelpful speculation, Buffy regathered the reins. "In any case, it's time we took a closer look."

"All of us?" asked Dor.
Buffy nodded, hiding her doubts about the wisdom of this idea. It required a deep mental breath to include them all in the commanding sweep of her eyes and say, "Get ready for a field trip."

Anya had taken the drastic and unprecedented step of locking the shop door during business hours and hanging a sign that said 'Back in 5 Minutes--Don't Leave!' If things turned out the way she expected, she would need those five minutes' worth of income and much more besides.

She was sitting on the closed toilet lid in the tiny bathroom with a timer ticking away the last few minutes of her wait. The ticking was a mocking sound, like a biological clock that wouldn't ding no matter how much you glared at it.

"Tick, tick, tick," she muttered to it, having no one else on hand to talk to. "They say a watched pot never boils, but that isn't true, I have no problem boiling. Water obeys me. They should say, 'A watched timer never dings,' because you can observe that for yourself. And timers are inherently imprecise devices, not even good for cooking eggs, and these are my eggs under the gun." She glanced down at her belly, lifted the hem of her blouse. "Go little eggs, go!" She didn't see any movement there, but would she? It was probably too early.

Anya picked up the timer, shook it vigorously with great suspicion, and set it back down. It continued to tick. She looked at the stick in her hand, but didn't look too closely, because she might see...well, she might not see anything, and that would be bad.

"It's really his sperm that need to do the work here," she said aloud, to whoever might be listening. The Powers That Be, if they had any interest. "I have perfectly healthy ovaries, and many fat little eggs just waiting to be implanted with seed. My eggs aren't lazy, oh no. I don't know about his guys. Probably all sitting around on their duffs like those fatheads he works with, yelling at all the hot mamas who walk by. They want sex, oh sure, but do they want the responsibility of fatherhood? I think--"

The timer dinged.

"Okay," she said. She held the strip in one hand and the paper instructions in the other. She had a frown on her face as she read, and then she looked at the strip. Looked at the strip, then at the paper. Looked at the paper, then at the strip. Strip, paper. Paper, strip. "Okay," she said at last, as it sunk in. And then, with giddiness, she tested out the words in her head: "Mom. Mama. Mother. Moeder. Mommy dearest."

Bouncing out of the bathroom with the pregnancy test strip still in her hand, Anya wore a grin that was wasted on the empty shop, but she didn't care. She had company now, a little Xander in her belly. "Madre. Mor. Mater. Mere," she said. She went behind her counter and placed the pregnancy strip down, centering it with great care within the frame she'd selected. When she'd assembled the frame and glass, she hung the results on the wall, next to her first dollar bill. She straightened both and stood back, regarding them proudly.

And with great pride she said, "Ma!"

Still riding her high with a light tra la la of song, she went to open the shop again. On the step outside waiting stood Colonel Sordicov. "Hello there," Anya said cheerfully, removing her sign and inviting him in. "Beautiful day, isn't it?" It was, of course, pitch black out, but day was in the
eye of the beholder.

"Miss Jenkins." He inclined his head. "I was concerned when I saw your shop closed."

"Nothing to worry about," she assured him, nearly skipping across the room to deposit her sign in the trash. "We're open for business! Not a lazy egg among us!"

Sordicov looked politely indulgent of her remark. "Indeed, you're the most hard-working egg I've ever had the pleasure of meeting, m'dear." He followed her, wandering closer. "And I dare say the prettiest."

Nothing could dent Anya's good mood today, even unwanted compliments. "Now you know I have a boyfriend," she said brightly. Her thoughts twirled her away into happiness and she slid a finger into her hair, tugging at its strands as her gaze dreamily unfocused. "And he has healthy, powerful sperm."

"Er, jolly good. Man should have lure on his line," Sordicov said agreeably. "Still, not much of a worry when the fish is dead, eh?"

For a moment, Anya wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly. "I beg your pardon?"

"Sorry, m'dear." Sordicov cleared his throat. "Uncouth of me to refer to the matter."

Her cheeks unaccountably hot under his gaze, Anya asked, "What matter?" For all his outward show of politeness, the Grauth had an air about him of over-familiarity that hadn't been earned by a few ballroom dances, a kind of sly twinkle in his eyes that she wasn't sure she liked.

"Ex-demon, you said." He extended his cane and hooked her wrist gently with it, drew her a few tottering steps closer. "Can't imagine everything made it through the remodeling job." He laid an overly intimate hand against her side, not quite brushing her belly. And she would have pulled away, but his sleepy eyes held her still, like a horrible little rabbit in a snare. "Demon's a hard thing to get out, once it's in. But you..." His smooth voice grew smoother. "...you, Miss Jenkins, are quite human where it counts, thank Sytos."

He was as close as Spike had been earlier that day, but his forwardness was intolerable to her and she pushed him away before he could take advantage. "You have a thing for humans, I'm gathering. Bit of a kink, huh?" Hiding her slight tremor, she stepped back, pulling herself behind a wall of refusal. "Well, you can forget about dipping your wick here, mister." Her eyes flashed dangerously and she lowered her voice, channeling the old Anyanka. "I think you'd find there's a little too much demon in me for you."

It had taken a while to cross town into the outlying burbs, and would have taken longer to reach the mountain if they hadn't hiked over to the river and stolen a boat. Willow had powered the vessel speedily and silently with some outboard witchcraft, and they'd pulled up near the base of Siliyik without alerting anyone to their arrival. Creeping close, they'd seen a net of lights spreading out from around the entrance, flooding the darkness and making visible a chain-link fence that surrounded the previously open parking lots and tourist center. Spotlights planted in the ground illuminated twin totem poles at the entry port and a carved, twenty-foot statue of a bear, which loomed over a cedar cabin serving as a guard house. Around the foot of the mountain spread the fringe of the forest, like a nest of pine and fir. Buffy had been able to see Grauth guards on patrol
just inside the fence, walking its perimeter with guns slung at the ready.

They'd had to circle around until they found another way in, an abandoned back entrance half buried in an overgrowth of shrubs, advertised by only a single rusted sign that hung across the path on a chain, claiming No Admittance. They'd single filed in, Buffy and Willow keeping the kids between them, and descended through the rough-hewn passages in a kind of twilight.

Now they could hear ahead of them the irregular clang of metal against rock, dozens of strikes overlapping one another, filling the caves with a staccato rhythm. Buffy glanced back at her own personal scout troop and raised a finger to her mouth. The kids were carrying weapons—short swords and cross-bows, whatever they'd had lying around. She didn't know how well they'd handle themselves if the situation demanded it, and hoped she wouldn't have to find out. Her plan didn't call for confrontation, just some amateur sleuthing.

She beckoned Dawn and Dor forward and whispered to the others, "Stay here. We'll take a look ahead." The rest hung back with various looks of disappointment or relief.

After creeping along the tunnel and around a corner, they crouched behind a tumble of rocks and surveyed the scene. The passage they'd come along opened up into a wider cavern, roof supported by columns of rock and broken up by toothy stalagmites or stalactites that Buffy, no science geek, generically categorized as "jaggy thingies." Around the cavern, humans in dirty and very ordinary street clothes chipped at the walls with small picks and hammers, dislodging dust and chunks of stone. Occasionally, one of them picked up a rock, examined it, and dumped it into a pail. As vacation packages went, Buffy thought this one sucked.

At the edge of the cavern a Grauth guard sat on a boulder and ate Twizzlers, gun propped at his side. Dragging down his shoulders was the mid-shift slump of profound boredom, an affliction transcending species and dimensions. Buffy gestured to Dawn, making little walky-fingers in the direction of the guard, then circling the air with her finger; in the universal sign language of rebels, this meant: you distract the demon while I circle around and jump him.

Dawn watched her hand-puppet show with a face that questioned Buffy's sanity. Rolling her eyes, Buffy pointed vigorously between Dawn and the guard, then crab-walked off to begin a circuit of the cavern, quieting several startled humans as she went. From the other side, after a minute, she heard Dawn scuffling across the ground.

"Um, hiyyy...yah," she heard Dawn say. "Me nah nu nah nu?" The Grauth guard got to his feet slowly, a Twizzler hanging from his slack mouth as he took in Dawn's appearance. Focused on her sister, he didn't notice Buffy creeping up. "Peekahbo kamah sutrah," Dawn said in a plaintive voice. "Dah lee la ma...la dee dah dah?"

When she was within a few paces of the guard, Buffy stepped out from behind a jaggy thingy and caught his eye. "Yo," she said, and spring-kicked him in the jaw. "Hi keeba!" The Grauth was down for the count. Satisfied, she turned away from her work, eyes stretching wide as she noticed Dawn's bare shoulders and then her bare--

"Dawn!" she yelped, aghast. "Put your shirt on!"

Meekly, Dawn pulled her top back on and tugged it down. "You said to get his attention," she said defensively. "Well, you didn't actually say, you mimed. Same diff."

"That was a very noble thing you did, miss," a heavy-set, fortyish man assured Dawn, still staring fixedly at her chest. Dawn shifted and crossed her arms.
Buffy's eyes narrowed at the man, then she glanced around at the bystanding miners, who had broken off work at the sign of freedom. "We're going to get you all out of here--but we need to know what you're mining."

"Gemstones," said the man who'd spoken before, his gaze finally lifting from Dawn's rack a split second before Buffy was ready to clock him. "There's rubies and sapphires 'round here. Not so big, but the grey-necks like them."

"Grey-necks?"

"Those things." The man jabbed a finger toward the unconscious Grauth.

Filing the term away, Buffy weighed the best means of getting the people out of the cave against her own curiosity. She found it hard to believe the Grauth were wasting their time digging out the guts of a mountain just to decorate their earlobes with pretty rocks. The idea of exploring further was tempting, but she had a dozen captives to liberate and a bunch of kids to do it with, so she curbed her inner Nancy Drew for the time being.

"We'll take these guys out along the tunnel," she said to Dawn and Dor. "After we get them to safety, I want to come back and--"

A crunching sound behind her and the girls' gasps made Buffy jerk around. The beefy man was just rising from the fallen Grauth, a bloody stone in his hand. The demon, its head bashed in, lay permanently unmoving. Beefy Guy looked at Buffy and tossed the stone aside. "Just finishing the job," he said, as if this were expected and helpful. Shocked and frozen, she didn't know what to say. It was no more than she should have done, but the act committed so casually by what she thought of as a civilian was somehow more disturbing.

"We should go," she said, swallowing down a reprimand that would have been empty.

"What's that?" Dor broke in fearfully, gazing back the way they'd come. Shots and sounds of running feet were growing louder, and the miners closest to the tunnel entrance edged away. As Buffy stepped forward to meet disaster, Willow ran in, followed by Marcos, Kerry, and Jason. Kethas and Tara stumbled in a moment later gripping hands, Kethas in human face, which was a fortunate choice of outerwear for the occasion.

"They're coming." Willow was breathless and near panic. "I can't cast spells--there's something in the mountain. It's like, kryptonitey."

Now was the perfect time to discover this. "We'll have to find another exit," Buffy said. With rising urgency, she turned to Beefy Guy. "Are there any other ways out of here?"

"Maybe," he said. "This way!"

Buffy fell back, guiding the miners and kids out first and then tagging close at their heels as they wended through the cutaway rock. She couldn't see ahead far enough to tell where the guy was leading them, and that made her nervous. Guards were close, their voices resonating against the vaulted ceilings and skipping off the walls until Buffy could no longer tell from which direction they came; it sounded as if they were all around, and she felt the pressure of claustrophobia and the helplessness of having things taken from her hands.

When she heard screams though, she knew the only possible source and put on a burst of frantic speed that caught her up to the others. Skidding around a corner she found herself in a junction where several tunnels met, the dense rock opening up wide enough to hold their own escape party
and a squad of guards.

Slayer Time was what she called it.

When her heart sped up and the world slowed down, time and space taking on the consistency of taffy, through which her legs moved heavily. Like those nightmares in which you run and run but the monster catches up, sinks its fangs--

--in your neck--

--and it was in the scope of an instant that she watched Fate reach into the earth and shake up their lives and drop them as randomly as dice.

The Grauth's bullets hit Kerry first as she spun to face the arriving guards, knocking redly against her chest and sending her to her knees, and with that same slow force struck Jason, who was leaping to catch her. Two more bullets zipped by Buffy's head with tiny *whuffs* of air, and she instinctively sheared away, then drove herself forward, toward the source of the attack. There were miners in the way, whose buffering bodies needed to be shoved aside. Bullets smacked into their flesh and the smell of blood was raw and rising.

She hit the nearest guard like a freight train. Even as he toppled she was taking his gun, using it like a club to smash the next closest Grauth, and dropping it and turning and kicking in motions fluid as freely running blood. Her head was a roar of red, her body nothing more than a device, a shuriken wheeling as it sliced mindlessly through its victims. Once, she felt something sting her arm but she ignored it, continuing until there was nothing more to kill, and then--

"Buffy!"

--snapping back into time with a sickening jar. With nothing left to fight, Buffy stopped on a dime, gaze taking in the litter of fallen bodies on the cave floor, both human and demon. She picked her way over to where Willow knelt. Kerry's eyes were wide open, staring sightlessly at the roof of the cavern, blood-drenched shirt clinging to her body. Next to her, Jason lay with eyes closed, one arm twisted and outflung in his last gesture to reach her. A sound sawing into Buffy's ears she identified after a moment as Dawn's sobs. Tara had one steadying arm around her, to keep her from falling.

"We have to go," Buffy said. The remaining miners, stunned and silent, huddled around their tiny group, too afraid to move in any direction. She gathered herself, wiped a handful of bloody hair from her face, then grabbed Willow's shoulder, drawing her to her feet, away from what was past help and hope. "Come on."

This time, she led them. If she picked a tunnel at random, they didn't need to know that. And when they resurfaced safely into the night, Buffy felt the touch of Fate again in the cold wind that stroked her face.

Capricious bitch.

"I'm not sure I'm liking this plan," Xander said, jiggling his foot nervously. "We should have gone with the others. A little recon, a little raiding party. Maybe some chips and dip."

Spike glanced up from his magazine, an incongruous copy of *Cosmopolitan* that he'd been
absorbed in for the last twenty minutes. Around the waiting room a rather seedy collection of human men sat reading similar material, while from speakers in the ceiling issued a Muzaked version of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" that lilited like background music for eternal limbo, which this assuredly was if Xander knew his circles of hell, which after a lifetime stuck on its lip he assuredly did.

"Listen to this," Spike began in an earnest tone. Xander listened. "'How do you rate yourself against your friends?'' Spike read. "'They're Pintos and you're a Porsche. They're Prada and you're Kathie Lee. They're Naomi, and you're Anna Nicole.'" He looked expectantly to Xander for help.

Goggling, Xander stared back. "And the purpose of this question?"

"Find out if I'm obsessed with appearances."

"Uh...'kay." After a second he hazarded, "Anna Nicole?"

"Right. Thanks." Spike reimmersed himself in his magazine with deep concentration.

It was insane to even bring up, but Xander had to say, "You know, I don't think I'm supposed to answer for you. You can't expect to find out the truth about yourself if you can't answer your own questions."

Spike, who'd flipped ahead a few pages, frowned and then smiled at his results. "Says I've got au naturel style and I'm a believer in inner beauty," he reported with satisfaction.

Xander was trying to remember which circle of hell was reserved for violent suicides when the door to the doctor's office opened and a Grauth in a white smock poked his head out. "Captain Aurelius and," he consulted his notes, "X-Ander?" They stood together and followed the doctor back along a carpeted corridor, into an examining room that immediately made Xander's skin break out in goosebumps.

"This had better not involve probes of any kind," he whispered fiercely to Spike, who gripped his arm and propelled him toward the exam table.

The doctor consulted his clipboard again. "This is one of your operatives, I take it, Captain?"

"That's right." Spike leaned against a counter edge, giving off a nonchalent air. "Busting his hump for the Imperial State of Grauth, day and night. Tireless little badger." Xander gave him a dirty look. "Thought I'd look into this treatment, reward his good services and all that."

"Fine, fine." The Grauth clucked his tongue as he perused Xander's form. "It shouldn't be a problem--he seems healthy enough. There will be some tests required, of course, and there's paperwork to fill out. You know how that goes."

Ignoring the invitation to commiserate, Spike said, "So what's this about then? How's it work?"

"Oh, I thought you knew." Surprised, the Grauth lowered his clipboard and folded his hands in front of him. "It's a simple process, a series of shots over the course of a few months that confer the attributes of our own noble species on his inferior body."

"Watch it, buddy," Xander said, startling a look from the doctor.

"Don't mind him." Spike drew the man's attention back. "He's lippy." A scowl warned Xander against further comment. "Go on."
"Mmm, yes. Well, that's all, really." He paused and scratched one horn. "Except for the side effects."

"Side effects?" Xander didn't bother to hide his alarm, while with an irritated glare, Spike clearly gave up on additional reproof. "I'm already going to be turned into a demon--what other side effects are there?" This whole visit might be a charade, but he was getting into the spirit of it. The spirit of horror.

"It varies from patient to patient. You might not be affected at all," the doctor soothed. "Even if you are, the vomiting is usually mild--and I believe the rash is quite bearable if you bathe every few hours."

"Sounds swell," Spike said breezily, wandering over to a skeleton and regarding it with chummy familiarity. He asked over his shoulder, "So how many lucky sods are there in this fun program of yours?"

The doctor hesitated. "Oh, I can't really--" When Spike turned, the Grauth caught his eye and stammered, "A, a few hundred or so. Just the most favored of our new subjects."

"You know, I don't think I deserve this," Xander put in. "I really haven't paid my dues yet." He slipped down off the table. "Maybe I could start out wearing a rubber mask, work my up to the full shebang."

"Nervousness is perfectly normal," the Grauth said, patting his arm. "But you've been chosen for a great honor. And in time you'll reap the benefits of your higher state of being."

*Help,* Xander's eyes said to Spike, who strolled over. "Yeahhh," the vampire drawled with a skeptical frown, as if beginning to entertain doubts. "But what if it goes arse up?"

"Arse...up?" the doctor echoed.

"Y'know." Spike waved a hand vaguely. "Allergic reaction."

"Very few subjects have died," the Grauth said, drawing himself up into professional umbrage. "Relatively speaking. Most were simply too old for the treatment. Others, too weak."

"Did I mention my bum heart?" Xander asked, raising his hand.

The doctor looked nonplussed. "A heart condition would eliminate you from consideration in the program."

"Damn," Xander said with affected feeling.

Outside in the hospital corridor, waiting for the elevator, Xander's manic energy subsided and left him a spent penny. "What did we learn?" he said rather grimly, more or less to himself. Next to him Spike, a lean and hungry spook, seemed to give his question consideration.

"Piss all." Spike's tone was edgy with disappointment.

Xander shook his head, thinking over the conversation they'd just had. "I call bull. This is no
reward system. A few hundred subjects? They'd be lucky to get a few dozen volunteers for the whole demon facial and sitz-bath package, and you can't tell me those losers in the waiting room were the Grauth's best assets. There's something else going on here.

In brooding collaboration they got into the elevator, going down.

The wind had changed direction and picked up strength, carrying pine and the cold, somehow metallic scent of the night to Buffy as she guided her lost sheep through the forest. She tried not to hear Dawn's wet sniffles and Dor's labored breath, both the result of heavy crying, listening to the stir of fir needles instead, a giant restlessness in the canopy above them.

"I think it's this way," Tara said as they paused at a fork in the path. Or where a fork would have been, if there'd been a path. Buffy doubted her Girl Scouting instincts. She could navigate the most complex of shopping malls and, after years of necessity, Sunnydale sewers, but she couldn't see the forest for the trees.

"Then we'll go this way." Buffy forged ahead, boots crunching on fallen leaves and underbrush as she tried to clear a way through the darkness.

"My battery's still drained," Willow said, falling into step with her. She flicked her wrist, casting a few weak showers of sparks that dispersed quickly instead of cohering into a magic compass. "I wish I knew why. I've never had anything like this happen before. Not unless I overdid it on magic, which I didn't." Her voice was low, rough with swallowed tears. "It's my fault they died. If I'd been able to tap deeper, find the power--"

"You couldn't. Something stopped you, Will, and it's not your fault." It's mine, she thought. For bringing them there in the first place, for arming them with toys, for not training them better. Guilt got to be a habit, something you lived in. It turned up, you put it on like a piece of armor, letting its heaviness remind you of the fight and how vulnerable you were underneath.

"I have to take a piece of the fault," Willow said quietly. Buffy stole a look at her clean, girlish profile and the troubled aurora of power it hid. "Like that piece of pie you have to eat, even though you're full, not because it's polite, but because you sit at the table.... We couldn't stop this--I couldn't--but this is what's happening now. So I'm just...eating the pie."

Buffy didn't quite nod, but felt that her silent acknowledgment was understood. Their similes were different, she thought, but they bore the same meaning, and then her attention was drawn away as without warning they reached the forest's edge, feet carrying them to a sudden halt on an outcropping of stone, overlooking a shallow quarry and what it contained. She took a deep breath that seemed to rip the heart from her.

"This night just gets worse and worse."

Spread out before them, encircled with burning torches, was a killing field of demon bodies. They lay in broken piles, gutted and shot and sprinkled with lime, left to decompose out here in the middle of nowhere. The stink they gave off was a gagging, terrible odor that made Buffy cover her mouth and turn away briefly before she forced herself to look again. The stench might have been stronger, but many of the bodies were still fresh. At the nearest edge two familiar forms had been pitched carelessly across a mound of dirt and bones. It was the lizardy demons from the bar, who'd
asked Buffy for help. They were still dressed in their stupid frippery, laid to rest with a shattered guitar and a spilled purse.

"I blew them off," Buffy whispered, her throat scorched with death, the taste of bile threatening to choke her. She could feel the gathering of horrified witnesses behind her, Dawn and Dor and Marcos and Kethas and the refugees from the mines, and she couldn't look away now from the demons. Their deaths were meaningless to her, or should have been. But instead she was having one of those revelations she didn't want, a sweeping unwelcome sense of wrong, as if she rode a scale that was tipping out of balance. These were demons, and she was the slayer, responsible for killing their kind. They weren't under her protection and never would be.

Unless she placed them there.

Back in town, the idea of night had fallen and the streets had emptied. Only a few lonely souls, or creatures without them, walked abroad. There was a crystalline chill in the air that seemed to promise snow, but the sky remained clear. Every window was shut, however, and curtains were drawn against the darkness.

"This is quite the Merry Christmas," Xander said, smiling at the picnic Anya had laid out. She'd spread a blanket across the training mats and lit a few fat candles—nothing spellifying, he hoped—and bought a tiny ham from the market, which she was serving with canned yams and potatoes, microwaved to steamy goodness. She looked anxious, which was nothing unusual, and he took a seat next to her and squeezed her hand. "This looks great, An."

"It's too early, but I thought we could celebrate...you know." She lifted both shoulders with an elaborate eloquence. "The great and awesome gift that is life."

"Always a call for festivities." Xander held back from digging into the food though, his gaze idly roaming across the spread. He couldn't quite keep his mind tethered here in the confines of the magic shop when his friends were out somewhere confronting the forces of evil.

"You're thinking," Anya said. "I can tell. Your brow furrows and you look constipated. What are you thinking?" Her tone was one of clinical curiosity; her expression suggested that she was braced to learn something unpleasant.

"I'm thinking...this is a time of year to share your ham with friends and family." He rubbed his thumb across her hand in a gentle motion. "Why don't you come with me back to base? Buffy and the others should be there by now."

Anya, her face crinkled and a tad confused, looked at him, then at her dinner, then at him again. "There's not enough ham for everyone," she pointed out.

"We'll make do. We'll stretch it out with boxed soup." He caught a glimpse of something in her eyes he couldn't pin down, a flicker of seriousness or disappointment she was keeping hidden. "What's wrong?" he asked. "What?"

"Do they want me there?" A reedy uncertainty had entered her voice, and she had spaniel eyes now, the eyes of a puppy that doesn't quite expect love. It sent a tiny shock through him, even as he puzzled at her worry.
"Of course they want you there! Anya. Why would you even ask that?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Anya."

"I don't know, I don't know--" She was getting squirrelly.

"An!"

"Because I'm a demon, Xander!" The words burst out like an unkept secret. "Even when I'm not. I have a thousand years inside me and they haven't gone away." Her hands rested on her belly with strange tenderness, as if her old vengeancy self actually lay coiled somewhere within. "And I can't imagine I'm Miss Popularity right now. I never have been before, but with all this--" She lifted one hand and waved elegant fingers at the enormity of it all. "They're probably thinking, 'That Anyanka, she must be very happy now that the Reign of Eternal Night has fallen.'"

"No, no, no. Why would you think that? Has someone said something?" Protectiveness was a tinder, ready to set his anger alight.

"They don't have to. They think it very loudly."

"I think you're imagining things," he said with as much gentleness as he could muster. And if it took a little effort, that was okay. You had to work at a relationship, at love. "Besides, you're a very human woman--" He stroked her hair. "Very soft and nicely shaped, and very not a demon."

Briefly, Anya looked almost wounded, and then her face took on that flinty resistance he so disliked, a mask for bitterness he couldn't understand. "Right. Huh." Tight laugh that was not a laugh. "Of course we both know why I can't be a demon, don't we? You couldn't love a demon, Xander. So I have to be a very human woman for you, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three hundred and--"

"An."

She cut her litany short and struggled to her feet. "You get my point."

"Yes," he said, rising and wondering with that familiar bemusement how things could see-saw from good to crappy so fast between them. "It's the sharp, stabby thing you're driving into my heart." Under the facetious words, real feeling lurked. He believed as always that he took great care not to hurt her, while she went to great lengths finding new ways to pain him. Maybe she did have a sharp pointy point, and that vengeance demon gig built skills that were hard to set aside after retirement.

"I'm sorry." She didn't look sorry. "I know you love me. The human me. But just once I'd like you to say you love the demon in me, too. The gnarly bits, the veiny face that I still see in the mirror sometimes, the occasional nostalgia for vengeance."

And, oh god, the one request he couldn't fulfill, because how could he do that? How could he love what she'd been, when what she'd been was evil? He moved closer and took her by the shoulders, looked down into her expectant, hopeful face. In his heart, he knew love was a kind of forgiveness. You forgave faults and sins and loved the sinner, not the sin. And if he'd never examined his love for her too closely, that wasn't because it didn't bear up to examination; it was because he was too close to it. That was the paradox of love. He'd have to pull back to get a good look, and once you pulled back, could you get close again?
"I love you," he told her. "I love who you are, what you've become. You put the past behind you, Anya. You overcame it, like--like a bad childhood."

The spark of hope in her eyes went out. "Overcame it," she said flatly, as if fascinated by this diagnosis. "That's what you think? I had a thousand-year 'bad childhood', but now I'm okay, because I 'overcame' it?"

How had that been the wrong thing to say? Xander couldn't begin to fathom. "I didn't mean it like that--"

"I know what you meant." She disengaged herself from him, stepped back. "I need to be alone now."

"An."

"Please go, Xander."

And in the usual way of things he did her bidding, and he went.

He'd had a vision in his mind of bringing Anya with him back to the Initiative, their arms full of food and gifts, and the others would be back from their mission, stripped of their coats, settling in after a job well done. Everyone sprawled on sleeping bags or sitting on crates in a circle, as if gathered around the place where a fire should be--maybe they could set something on fire again just to have a little burn, build the proper atmosphere. And then they'd assemble at the table for their pre-Christmas feast, share the canned goods and crackers. There'd be talk and laughter, a feast of candles burning in defiance of the darkness.

But when Xander came in alone, there was a heavy silence to the room he immediately didn't like. Buffy, Tara, and Willow were sitting at the table by themselves, not talking, not eating. He looked around and saw the kids on their sleeping bags, silent but awake; something about them struck him as wrong, but he couldn't quite make his mind accept it yet. What he knew.

"Hey," he said, coming over to sit at the table with the women. They turned their faces to him in wan welcome, except for Buffy, who moved her head slightly but didn't meet his eyes. Xander's stomach curled in on itself in dread. "Okay. Tell me."

"The mission didn't go so well," Tara said. Her eyes and nose were pink from crying, but she wasn't crying now. She looked tired. "Jason and Kerry were killed. And some of the miners we were rescuing."

He should have been there, was his instant thought. His own investigations could have waited another day. He hadn't questioned the assignment Buffy had handed out, no one had, but now he wished he'd been more--what had Spike called him--lippy. He should have been lippy, told them he was going with them, been there to help. It might have made a difference.

"Oh my god," he said aloud, his head bowing under the weight of this news. "Oh god." Then he looked up. "How...?"

"It was quick," Willow said, stealing a glance at Buffy. "They were shot."
Just...shot. No magic. Just a bullet and bang, death. It was so mundane, or should have been, but these were...these were still demons doing the shooting. Demons. Hatred held sick sway over his thoughts for a moment, then blurred indiscernibly into sadness. He wanted hatred's comfort, but it wasn't warming him today. What had been a zealous fire felt cold as ashes. "We should try to find their parents," he said. "Tell them...." Tell them their kids were dead. Christ.

"We will," Buffy said, breaking her silence. She sounded as if she were making a promise to herself. Her head lifted and Xander could see her surfacing from wherever she'd sunk, returning to them. "There's more you need to know," she said, turning to take him in. "They're killing other demons--we came across a, I guess you'd call it a dumping ground. There were bodies. Lots of them."

He assimilated this, tried to, but she was still talking.

"When I saw all those bodies..." She looked at Willow now, and Tara, sharing her gaze around the table. "It was like nothing I've ever seen before. What happens when they start doing that to humans? What if they already have?" Her hands were folded, one on top of the other. "We can't play by the rules anymore. It's time to think outside the box."

"What box is that, Buff?"

"We need help with this fight. I think...I think Spike is right. We need allies." Her green gaze returned to Xander, a warrior queen affirming her captain. "And you're right, too. We need to train better, and we need to do it with guns."

He wasn't sure he wanted to be right. Being right sounded wrong. The other part of the plan didn't sound so great either. "So we're going to do what--fight side by side with vampires? With things that steal souls and kill children?" His voice was low and steady so as not to carry to their own kids, and the necessity of quietness robbed his words of accusation. He was as tired as the rest of them at the table.

"We'll take whoever we can get. Whoever isn't on their side, we'll take for ours." The sureness of Buffy's command deterred argument. Even Willow seemed to have resigned herself to this change of heart.

"Most of the vampires are with the Grauth," Tara noted.

"Most," Buffy said. "Maybe not all."

It was crazy talk, and it hurt Xander's head, but he couldn't dredge up the words to articulate this. He thought suddenly of Kerry, with her pierced tongue and kinky hair and the make-up she managed to find time to put on even when the world was turned upside down. And Jason, with his funky shaved scalp and...well, he'd never learned a lot about Jason. Now he never would. They'd been Dawn's friends, and now they were dead. And probably by this time next year, all the rest of them would be gone, too. Unless they did something big and drastic and stupid, like ally themselves with demons, and oh fuck, that was it. That was what they had to do.

He straightened up in his seat. "I guess we know where to get started, then," he said. Then he paused. "Where do we get started?"

Lame wit won him a smile. Imagine what he'd get if he ever sharpened that baby. "I don't know," Buffy confessed. "I'm thinking we put the word out. Make contacts. Start organizing and getting serious."
Willow looked up from the design she'd been digging into the table with her fingernail. "This isn't going to happen without more casualties," she said softly, almost apologetic for pointing this out. "Are we ready for that?"

They all looked at each other, dwelling on the question in silence. "We'll just have to make sure the losses are minimal," Xander said at last. "It's all about taking this band of rag-tag misfits and making them into a crack paramilitary outfit." He caught their looks. "Or...something a little less Clint."

"No," Buffy said. "You're right. That's exactly what it's about."

In the back of the Magic Box, Anya was putting herself to bed for the night. She rarely spent the night at their apartment these days, and each time she visited she expected to find it empty of goods or full of Grauth. She'd brought half her clothes down to the shop by this point, but was wearing now a pair of striped pajamas that belonged to Xander. They hung loosely on her small body, but she found them comforting. She wore them when he wasn't around, and they were an important element in her tiny re-creation of home here in the corner of the training room, along with her narrow cot, its covers turned down in a triangle, and the bedside packing box on which sat a lamp.

She was rubbing a pumice stone across her feet as she sat on the edge of the cot, alone in the lamplight, but not quite alone. You had to take care of your feet, no matter what else happened. Soldiers in the field knew that, and it mattered no less to those not in the field. And when you thought about it, she was taking care of her feet for two now. Soon she'd be lugging around a lot of extra weight, and these small details could only get more important.

If she'd been a different type of person, she might have said prayers before she went to sleep. Prayer-like thoughts were in her mind whether she wanted them or not. This was the hour when her thoughts turned to the others, and she wished them safe.

Even if they were thoughtless bastards with stupid powerful sperm.

This was the hour when all good little kiddies were at home in their beds, and the bad kiddies were in other people's. Of course, these days you couldn't count on having a bed at all, unless you were a high-ranking officer in the Army of the New Grauth Reich. And then you had the luxury of not going to bed at all. You could stay out the entire bloody night, hopping from one club to the next in the curfew-free officers' district, ending up in the smoky crush of a brothel on the outskirts of respectability, listening to Gershwin.

"There's a saying old, says that love is blind; still we're often told, seek and ye shall find--so I'm going to seek a certain girl I've had in mind..."

Spike was reclining in his chair in a pose of rapt attention while the torch singer swayed, her sequins glittering under the dim spotlight, a pinch of holly on her breast one of the few tokens of holiday spirit in the room. He wasn't so focused that he didn't notice Rosa descending from the stairs, adjusting the strap of her dress, smoothing her skirt. She halted at the last step, one hand on
the newel, and watched the singer for a moment, then caught his eye across the room, over the heads of the audience. He sketched a bare nod, and she turned and went back up.

He drained his glass, took one last toke before mashing out his cigarette. He had someone to see.

Under the blanket of grief and darkness, Dor and Marcos were taking comfort. Dawn could hear them, though she pretended not to. She'd suspected for a while now they had a thing for each other, even though Dor had been with Jason and Marcos with Kerry. She pictured the four of them in one big bed together. Remove two of them and the remaining two would roll down to meet each other in the middle, into that sunken spot of the mattress. She didn't blame them, couldn't quite convince herself it was tacky. It just seemed natural. Like surviving.

Part of Dawn wanted that for herself, to roll over toward Kethas, the nearest male she could even hope to lay claim to at the moment, and pull him close and ask for comfort with her mouth. She turned in her sleeping bag discreetly, propping herself to glance at him, but he was asleep. Figured. Her body ached all over, especially that part of her, between her legs, that she couldn't decide on a name for, because all the names were dry, like terms teachers used in health class, or dirty, like what boys said when they wanted to be crude. She was seventeen years old and it was time to have sex. She could die. It could happen so easily. She wanted to cross sex off the list before death. The other way around was just too gross to contemplate.

And that she was thinking of sex at all right now seemed terribly wrong, but whenever she thought of Kerry and Jason she cried.

Sadness was always so salty and damp. That must be why it felt like an ocean.

Across the room from her sister, Buffy lay curled on her side, eyes wide open. A white candle was burning in its dish, and she reached out and touched the flame with her finger, not flinching when it burned. She was going to have to get tough. Tougher. She would have to watch those around her die and keep on fighting until the town was freed, until they were back in the world again.

The light of the candle was steadying now, but she couldn't waste it. She snuffed it out.

As the light winked out from where Buffy lay, Willow shifted, bringing her chin to rest on the hard curve of Tara's sleeping head. She wanted to sleep too, but worries pressed close, filling her with anxious shadows. She watched her own candle flame flicker and lifted a finger toward it with a soft command: "Exstingue." But the candle kept burning, and she had no choice but to reach over and kill its light with her own hand.
The atmosphere on base wasn't conducive to sleep, and he couldn't return to Anya, so Xander took a long walk, out through the virtual minefield of the UC Sunnydale campus. He knew there were Grauth soldiers about; he occasionally heard them patrolling in pairs, their voices carrying loudly as they chatted and laughed and cracked jokes. Not very good soldiers, the Grauth. It was comforting, in its way.

He kept rearranging his thoughts, but they didn't come together. It felt as if he'd missed a puzzle piece somewhere, or several. Blank spots where sense should be. But then, it had been a long day. Maybe even two. He'd lost track of time and of sleep. When had things gotten so strange? It certainly wasn't however many weeks ago when the Grauth invaded. Strangeness had made a home in him long before that.

As Xander walked, driven randomly by his thoughts, he neared one of the paths criss-crossing the campus grounds. He paused at its periphery behind a clump of bushes, rousing himself just enough to notice where he was before he stepped out into danger, enough to spot that a Grauth guard was approaching. He took a step back, blending into the shadowy concealment of a tree and drawing his knife out by instinct, raising the blade at the ready. Just in case. In case the soldier spotted him. Just in case.

It was the middle of the night, but certain people were still awake and about; a figure moving through a living room, out of the shadows and into the glare of light.

"Hey," said Xander, looking up from his meal of meatloaf and mashed potatoes to where Spike stood framed in the doorway. Beside him, Xander's mother hovered uncertainly, fingers twisting her loose wristwatch. "Thanks for coming." The lamp above the dinette table swung back and forth like the light in an interrogation room, troubling the shadows, which grew and shrunk with uneasy rhythms.

"Thought I'd better see what you needed at this hour." Spike's uniform was gaudier than Xander remembered, and at the same time somehow blacker, gleaming heavily like the carapace of an insect. He looked like Darth Vader. Was he wearing chest armor?

"Is it late?"

"Two in the morning."

"We don't have mornings anymore." Xander pushed away his meatloaf, which had too much ketchup and looked like dead woodchuck, or something worse. His mother had disappeared, and he didn't know where his father was. He stood up and stumbled unsteadily against the side of the table.

"Easy there," Spike said, catching him. Xander looked down at his side and saw that he was bleeding again. He'd bandaged it up so as not to alarm his mother, but it was seeping through his shirt. The demon had gotten in a few blows before it died, and if Buffy found out she was gonna be pissed.
"I killed it," he told Spike, managing a smile. Spike's confused expression forced him to clarify: "It fought, but I came out on top. Are you surprised?"

"You don't have to justify yourself to me, Harris."

"Justify, testify." Xander realized Spike's arms were still around him, holding him up. "I'm just really tired. Really tired of things. Things with funny sharp shapes. Like squares in round pegs. Or holes, maybe." He leaned in and rested his head against Spike's shoulder, which felt warm and smelled of wool, like a sweater after you got caught in the rain. The vampire's arms were entirely encircling him now.

"You smell of blood," Spike whispered in his ear. Xander could feel himself getting hard at the words, which wasn't entirely pleasant or unpleasant, neither surprising or unsurprising.

"I can't get it out," he replied, drawing back reluctantly. He was afraid he was bleeding against Spike, he could feel a spreading wetness from within his shirt, but the other man didn't seem to notice. And then Spike kissed him, the way he must have kissed Buffy a thousand times, coldly with that dead mouth, a demon playing with him, terrible and miserable and sucking every bit of life from his body as the shadows in the room darkened around them.

When they broke apart, Xander fell, staggering back, looking down to find his shirt bathed in blood, his own life coursing free. Looking up at Spike, who had blood on his mouth. "Sorry," he said as Xander dropped to the carpet. "I was hungrier than I thought."

"You vamped me!" Xander exclaimed in outrage. He couldn't see his own newly pale face and dead eyes, but his pulse was gone and his body felt heavy and stuffed with cotton, as if it wasn't his own. Spike knelt down and held up a pink hand mirror, its face an oval into which Xander's reflection vanished, and he held the mirror close enough that it obscured his own face perfectly.

"Fair trade," he said from behind the mirror. "You've taken my dream."

In the mirror, Xander now saw a girl's face with lank hair, her features as dead as his. He was the girl, or wasn't; couldn't tell. He didn't know her, but then he didn't know himself.

Looking away from that confusion, he discovered a stake in his hand, and it was the work of an instant to strike out against the demon who taunted him. The wood struck flesh and then bone and then heart, and Spike, his mirror tumbling aside, fell back in a splash of dust to become a part of his mother's carpet, something to be vacuumed up if she ever got around to it.

Xander took no joy in the act, which had been quick, and that was funny, because he wasn't holding a stake any longer but a bloody knife.

"That was quick," he said, voicing his own thoughts. "A knife would be slow."

With fear like a vise in his chest, he turned his head and gazed across the floor to where Anya lay crumpled on her side, skirt shoved up past her knees to show off her shapely doll legs, hair hiding her face. Every face was tucked away or inside out or changed. Wrongness, wrong. He'd done that to her, broken her, before Spike came to visit, while his mother served him dinner, and he could never take it back. With a sick and desperate ache he said, "Anya, Anya--"

She tipped her head back, showing him her smile, the grey mottled skin of a Grauth demon. "You killed me," she said conversationally. "Slayed the nasty demon. Good job. Rah rah." Her hand made feeble motions against the carpet, dragging across a pool of blood that had spilled from her knife-wounded body, from intricate decorations cut into the skin below her lacy bra. And oh god,
he had killed her, he had. And with that wrenching shot of knowledge--

He woke.

Xander found himself lying atop his sleeping bag in the corner of the Initiative common room, apart from the others but close enough to see their own unmoving forms. He shoved himself up onto one arm, still dream-shocked, his mouth hanging half-open in an unspent gasp, his heart racing. His knife lay by the side of his bag, and he picked it up and stared at it closely. Its blade was clean, and he dropped it again and then suddenly he began to cry, collapsing back onto his side, one hand pressed to his face to stifle his sobs. No one should hear him cry. It wasn't a manly thing to do and somehow, ridiculously, he was the only man here.

"Buffy."

Giles’s eyes shot open as he woke.

The word was already dying on his lips, and it was like a box opening within a box of thoughts in his head, as he sat up from his bed in the violent moonlight, trying to hold on to the remnants of his dream and the name that had come to him. It seemed so important, but it was dissipating quickly, dissolving like smoke from a cigarette.

"Buffy," he repeated, touching his head to try and keep the name there, and its significance. And then he knew where he'd heard it, or at least seen it. He snapped on the lamp and picked up the folded letter he'd left there, read aloud to himself the words he'd half memorized. "'We need all the help we can get. Buffy needs you....'"

Looking up from the letter, he stared into space with a frown. Someone needed his help.

Someone named Buffy.

The End

Chapter End Notes

I still do appreciate feedback. I read all your e-mails, and then I stuff them into a cherished folder and flee in terror of having to reply.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
Chapter Notes

So, this is the one where I was supposed to break the arc just a little, more or less write a fun one-off, sort of Duck Soup meets Gosford Park. Lots of champagne, dancing, girly skirts. All still there. But it did get changed a bit.

This ep starts off in media res with a few events having taken place offscreen over a period of a few weeks. There are a few plot holes, I realize; some more deliberate than not--because, hey, I'm trying to emulate canon after all--and some I probably don't even see. Hopefully they aren't too large. And god, this took a long time. I don't even know what's going on going forward. I feel like I want to re-read the whole set of stories and get a sense of what it looks like so far, but I also want to do that with printed versions and am not sure that is going to be feasible. Must suck it up I guess. Am afraid of losing track of plot points that I meant to string out like pretty pearls, is the thing.

Now that I've wibbled.

Twelfth episode in an alternate season 8, with an AU season 7 in between; everything branches off from "Gone." Standard disclaimers, because I still love Joss, the big mutant enemy, and all his little grr-argh writers, and Santa Claus. I like newts, too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She glided through the crowd under an expensively chandeliered glow, using her wide skirts to brush aside whoever stepped in her way. Ahead of her she spotted her prize; he'd been pointed out to her earlier and she recognized now the distinctive shape of the back of his head, the hair whose ridiculous color matched the brilliance of the lamps. In dandified, formal attire tailored for his short stature, he stood by the outstretched branches of a fir tree that had been uprooted from nature and strung with fairy lights. His head was bowed attentively as he listened to someone, an affectation of politeness she despised in her kind, even when she politically adopted it herself.

When she reached him, she touched his sleeve and asked, "May I have this dance?"

Her voice made the vampire turn slowly on his well-shod heel, a swivel of black suggesting a corkscrew as his head followed the movement of his shoulder, gaze drifting down to note the white-gloved hand she'd laid across his arm, then lifting to level clear blue eyes on her. For one second, she could see him deliberating--on the question of her identity, on her possible status, on the propriety of his reply--and then he rudely said, "No." And turned away again.

Perhaps she shouldn't have asked him in game face. With a mild snarl of irritation and a sense of social embarrassment, she snapped open her fan, hid her fangs, and slunk off to regroup.
"Really, Aurelius. What a toffee-nosed little cad you are. You shame even the dogs." Sordicov peered at Spike through his monocle. "If you don't dance with some of them, you'll get yourself a reputation in the ladies' lounge."

Spike drew a toothpicked olive out of a martini glass of blood and said, "That would be tragic."

"Many a hero has walked safely off the battlefield, only to be gutted in the powder room. When you're my age, you'll know better."

"And then forget it a hundred years later," Spike agreed absently, spotting Tara across the floor as she edged sideways through the crowd, hunch-shouldered and awkward, offering a tray of hor d'oeuvres to the party-goers. He caught her eye then let his glance slide away so as not to attract notice.

"Oh Sytos, here comes the rank and file." Sordicov's grumble casually established his own snobbery and drew Spike's attention to the entrance, where a troop of red-jacketed demons were just arriving, creating a bottleneck in the arched doorway. They looked stiff and nervous even en masse, and had an unmistakably bureaucratic air to them. "Clerks and bootblacks," Sordicov remarked in dismissal.

"Bootblacks?" The Grauth were a retro race, as mired in anachronism as a disco dance class, but literalism still seemed unlikely.

"Secretaries, aides, that sort. Don't know why Naziren put them on the guest list. Cramped enough already, even in a house this size." He inclined his head toward the balconies edging the vast ballroom, where rows of ladies and officers leaned in pairs between the paneled columns like an array of brightly colored dolls, like--Spike thought--a collection of Dru's little friends.

"Posh digs, though," Spike observed. "Guess Naziren must have some pull to rate a place like this. To the manner born, eh?"

Sordicov gave him a strange, blank look. "Well, precisely so," he said, as if there were some blindingly obvious truth in what Spike had said.

Before Spike could follow up on that there was a rustle of skirts and bodies, and from a part in the crowd a figure rose, stepping onto the stage and gesturing a halt to the orchestra's music. As it was silenced, their host gazed out over his audience and smiled, the darkness of his eyes overshadowing the smile without lessening its twist of charm. And looking at him, it struck Spike for the first time that Naziren had hair. He squinted sideways at Sordicov for comparison, noting the monocled demon's bald pate, then back at Naziren. No doubt about it. Lush head of hair too, like some wild maestro after a round of Wagner. All the other Grauth had the cueball look down, or else a short fuzzy pelt more like mold on an orange than a proper do, while the females wore top-heavy wigs with elaborate ribbons and pearls.

He decided this was something to think more about, and tuned into the demon's words. "Thank you all for coming tonight," Naziren was saying. "As we welcome in the new year together, let us also celebrate the destiny that has brought us here and remember those who have fought and died for it." He bowed his head briefly, and the crowd followed suit with respectful quiet. Spike, surveying the sea of wigs and horns, barely held in a snort.

Naziren raised his head again, a sardonic line to his jaw and glint to his eye, as if he'd heard what hadn't been uttered. Smooth bastard. "I hope that you will all enjoy tonight's festivities. We have very special treats in store, and when your exertions on the dance floor leave your blood warm," a ripple of laughter from his audience, "you can cool down in the ice garden, crafted by our very
own Director of Winter." He nodded at an official fellow in the crowd with a white sash, who bowed at the sudden spotlight of everyone's applause.

"And now," said Naziren, commanding a hush again, "for your enjoyment, native dancers will perform an interpretation of The Fall of Sytos."

Native dancers? Spike wondered, watching with everyone else as a troupe of adolescent human ballerinas took the stage and began flitting around, waving scarves and flexing en pointe in some wispy rendition of Grauth mythology.

"Lovely, lovely," sighed Sordicov. Spike gave him a black-browed, disgusted look that went unnoticed.

"Isn't it?" crooned the vampire woman who'd accosted him earlier, slinking up alongside Spike and turning a pristinely fangy smile on him. "A shame we can't eat them." His eyes narrowed as she cocked her head. "Of course, dancing is a competitive art. Not everyone makes the...cut." She clinked her glass of blood gently against his own, as he froze and stared down at his martini dei sangui.

Under the stage lights the dancers continued to perform with a stiff perfection; as if their lives depended on it.

It was a spacious kitchen, made cramped by rows of prep tables and an army of busy bodies whose job it was to feed the party guests. Demon matrons bustled through the counters, lending distracted aid to each area of food preparation.

At the long central table a row of trays held appetizers in various states of assembly: concentric rings of crackers covered in mysterious substances, ranked celery stalks embedded with green cheese, bowls of sugared nuts and candies, and--

"Oh my god," Buffy said in a strangled, high-pitched voice.

Tara glanced up anxiously from the tray she was covering in folded meat. "What?"

Buffy gestured at her own serving platter, on which lay rows of neatly overlapping hors d'oeuvres, which appeared to be the bodies of roasted and skinless... "Mice," Buffy hissed.

"Oh dear," Tara said faintly.

"You can still see their tails." Buffy eyed the display with a kind of mournful horror. "I can't serve this."

After looking surreptitiously around, Tara edged closer to offer moral support. "Maybe they're demon mice." A disbelieving stare from Buffy prompted a small, helpless shrug. "At least--they probably weren't anyone's pets."

"I hate this job," Buffy muttered under her breath, grimacing as she began to poke toothpicks in the mice. "Why did we get stuck with the maid uniforms and the mouse serving?"

Tara raised her brows before saying wisely, "I think the coin flip had something to do with it."
Though I did like your idea about arm wrestling," she hastened to add.

"I said I'd take a three-shot tequila handicap, didn't I? And no one knows what the slayer looks like, really--all humans look alike to them. Hmph. There should really be more slayer perks. Like...a free pass to clubs, and discounts on nail polish, and no kitchen duty."

"Life is tough," Tara sympathized. "But hey. At least we aren't lying deep-fried on a bed of radicchio."

Holding up a leaf, Buffy frowned. "Wait, is that what radicchio looks like? What have I been eating all these years?"

Smiling, Tara didn't reply, but a moment later her smile dwindled and, with other thoughts on her mind, she said, "I hope the kids are okay. I hate leaving them alone--even if Dawn is there."

Because she's a kid herself, thought Buffy. "I know. But they'll manage. They have to." A glance around confirmed that no one in the kitchen was lurking nearby or paying their quiet human chatter any mind. "They've seen their friends die, they've spent weeks training...it wasn't the way I wanted things to go, but a lot of decisions are being taken out of our hands." She paused, then lifted a mouse on a stick and stared at it sadly. "I would have taken a four-shot handicap, you know."

Buffy shouldered through the swinging door carrying her tray in both hands, afraid she'd drop it and send fried mice sliding across the parquet into the milling shoes of demons.

When she was nine, she'd been afraid of bees. Nine had been a good age.

In the steamy kitchen she'd begun to sweat and now her outfit was scratching her in a number of unseemly places that she couldn't attack in public. The French maid's uniform, with its black skirt and white apron, made her feel faintly ridiculous, as if she'd been exposed in the middle of some kinky sex act. Most of the party-goers paid no attention to her even as they plucked crisp mice off the tray, but occasional male gazes tracked her progress, and one sneaky fanny pat caused her to jump and nearly stumble into a demon officer.

He turned at her appearance and flicked dark eyes down her body without much apparent interest. Buffy tried not to show any familiarity. The only time she'd seen General Nilec before now had been on stage during the victory speeches, when she'd shot at him and his compatriots. Not that he'd know that, but she couldn't help but feel that her identity and all her secrets were written on her face. She smiled at him.

"Mouse?" she offered, holding out the tray.

"General," someone said, "you know Captain Aurelius."

Buffy tensed and General Nilec turned his head, shoulder shifting to reveal Spike being ushered into his presence by another officer. His uniform was as black as her own dress, and as much a costume, but less frivolous. The tunic collar encircled his neck, lending a stiff, unSpike-like formality to his posture, above which the jut of his chin shelved an expressionless face that could have been made of marble. His gaze passed coldly over Buffy without any sign of recognition and moved on as if she were beneath his notice.
For one second she was unreasonably hurt, then rationality regained the upper hand. She left them to their socializing and passed through the crowd, distributing the remainder of her mice. By the time she reached the far doors, her tray was empty. She laid it on a buffet and slipped out into the hall, where she met up with Xander. His waiterly tux was more dignified than her own outfit, but she quashed any resentment and drew him into an alcove under a nearby set of stairs.

"Harris. Xander Harris," he clipped out before she could say anything. After adjusting his cuffs with double-oh panache, he looked furtively around, then lifted his wrist to his mouth and pretended to speak into a hidden transmitter. "The cow is in the pasture. Repeat, the cow is in the pasture."

That might have been offensive, if she'd been inclined to take it personally. "Have you found anything?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Oh, come on," he said. "Get in the spirit, Buff." There were layers of darkness in his eyes that time on the Hellmouth had added, but recent months had worked even more visible changes in him, chiseling at his face until the years fell away, leaving hollows under his cheeks and edges to his jaw that hadn't been there since high school. An old, flippant humor laced his voice now, carrying her back. "You know, the usual perks of espionage may be lacking--wine, women, invisible cars--but we do have code words."

"Moo," she said blandly.

"Good enough." They fell silent and waited as a demon servant passed through the hall, trundling a cart of pastries; he paid them no attention, but Xander drew a little closer. "The traffic's kind of heavy around here, so I started at the top and worked my way down. Not much interesting on the third and fourth floors, unless you count a drawerful of ladies' lingerie, a book of naughty etchings, and a pair of handcuffs."

She chewed her lip. "Not exactly what we were looking for."

"Speak for yourself."

"I'm going to poke around down here," she said. "You head back up to the second floor. There might be offices up there, or--"

"What's going on here?"

Buffy and Xander both turned in startlement at the appearance of the head butler and his assistant. "Nothing," Buffy said quickly. "We were just, ah--" Plotting, her mind supplied. Spying, thieving, hiding, code words, invisible cars, cows. God, she hated extemporaneous lying and she'd always sucked at it, which explained why she'd been more or less permanently grounded from grade school to graduation. "We were just--"

"Canoodling," said Xander. He draped an arm around her, where it lay like a side of friendly beef. "We just can't keep our hands off each other. It's like the honeymoon never ended." He smiled fatuously at the demons and squeezed Buffy's shoulder with a rather forceful show of enthusiasm.

"Oh yes," Buffy piped up, after a moment's blink of confusion. "My man." She slid an arm around his waist and let him pull her close. "He's so...super. With the bulgy man-muscles and, mmmm, those abs." She patted his stomach.

"Get back to work," the butler said in disgust. "And if I catch you at it again, you'll both be out on the street."
They slunk off in opposite directions under his watchful eyes, leaving the demons alone by the stairs. "This is why I advise against slave labor and temp agencies," the head butler said to his assistant. "You get what you pay for."

After the butlers had moved on, Buffy doubled back and sidled down the hall toward the rear of the house. At a junction of identical-looking hallways lined with fluted lamps and ancestral portraits, she turned in the direction that led her even further from the music and laughter spilling out of the overstuffed ballroom. Here it was quieter, quiet enough that her own footsteps on the plush carpet spooked her once or twice, but when she turned, no one was following her. She tried the knobs on doors until she found one that was unlocked, and slipped in.

The room was a study, lit only by a small desk lamp with a red shade, its walls lined with densely packed bookshelves, broken here and there by oil paintings and exotic wooden masks. The drapes on the windows were open, showing a swirl of snow outside, though it could have just been a layer of powder disturbed by the wind.

Buffy inspected the bookshelves and knick-knacks as she passed, giving her surroundings the cursory but practiced eye of a slayer who’d had one too many monsters get the jump on her. The desk was big and glossy and heavy-looking, covered with the usual stuff you see on desks: neat stacks of paper, a few books, a fountain pen. A letter knife with a bone handle. A wooden box that revealed cigarettes when she opened it. A rock, worn smooth by someone's hand, serving as a paperweight. The personal litter reminded her strangely of Giles--didn't he have that exact same memo pad?--and gave her a momentary pang.

There was no computer and that was a relief. These demons did things the old-fashioned way, and so would Buffy. She sat down and flipped open a leather-bound file folder. The contents were in a strange language, what must have been Grauth but was no better than Greek to her. She rolled her eyes in irritation and continued searching, opening drawers and sifting through their contents.

When she heard the sound, she at first thought it was another false alarm, that her own movements had merely knocked something aside within the desk. Then it came again, this time nearer, a click of tumblers. She looked up to see the door handle turning, and felt a twist of shock that bumped her heart rate up. It would be stupid to get caught like this, like the amateur sleuth in some potboiler. It occurred to her for a split second that she might be able to go out the window and make her way around the house back to kitchen. But there wasn't time for that, so she did the embarrassingly obvious, and hid beneath the desk.

In the powder room, Anya turned sideways and examined the profile of her gown, running her hands down her belly, smoothing the line of the material. Nothing was showing yet, and she sighed in resignation, then returned to her grooming, leaning toward the mirror to apply a fresh coat of lipstick. White light panels surrounded the glass and raised a glow in the marble counter beneath it. Behind her the room stretched, a box of shadowy red walls captured by the mirror as if by a camera. You could tell the expense of things by their simplicity. Darkened except for the mirror, the room had a plush and muted emptiness, broken only by a few ottomans upholstered in wine-
colored velvet. Even the toilets were hidden away behind high stalls of polished wood, as private as closets and as easily overlooked.

Anya had to admit she liked Grauth style. The world would be a better place if all toilets were so discreet.

As she was gently widening her eye-liner with a pencil, Willow appeared next to her. Anya cut her gaze over and inspected Willow's dress for comparison purposes. Its material gleamed with the richness of spun gold, which of course could not really be spun, except by that stupid little dwarf, Rumplestiltskin, for all the good it had done him. With critical satisfaction, Anya decided that the dress made Willow appear sallow. Also, her hair was too red.

"Hey," said Willow rather glumly, staring at herself in the mirror with a frown.

"Hey," Anya replied.

"Do you have any aspirin?"

Anya rooted through her handbag, discarding its contents on the counter one by one: compact, gloves, comb, Erymanthian hex powder--you never knew when that would come in handy--handkerchief, Kit-Kat bars. "No. No aspirin. Sorry."

"'S okay. I'll live." The gloomy note in Willow's voice suggested otherwise.

"You look awful," Anya said frankly. Willow glanced at her. "Not your dress or your hair," Anya clarified. "You need some more powder to cover those dark circles under your eyes. Here." She handed over her compact, an admirable little clamshell of ebony and silver she'd picked up recently in the new downtown ladies' department store. Most of the make-up was designed for a greyer complexion, but she'd managed to find this.

Obediently, Willow began dusting it on. "I haven't been sleeping too well. Not since our trip to the mines, and the you-know-what."

Anya put on the expected show of sympathy. "Yes. I imagine it's unpleasant, having your magical energies sucked away, leaving you a depleted husk incapable of the smallest spell or glamour, vulnerable to demons and dependent on humans for your well-being."

Sarcasm had gradually wedged its way into her voice like a thin blade. "Not that I'd know anything about that."

"I forgot you've been there." Willow's reflection smiled at her in the mirror with a wan kindness, and Anya immediately regretted her own lack of same. "I'm not sure I'm dealing as well as you did. And you had, what, a thousand years in? I've only had magic, real magic, for a few years, but living without it is like living without a leg or an arm, or without any limbs at all."

"So you're just, like, a torso with a head. Huh. I cursed men with that fate once or twice...okay, two hundred and eleven times. Understandably, a popular choice for a disempowered social group." Anya paused. "You know, even if we find the plans for this magic-sucking thing, it might not be reversible."

"I know. But at least looking for it makes me feel less useless. I mean, it was bad enough when I thought it was just some weird cave-rock anti-mojo. But now they've got unmagicking dynamos all over town, and I can't even snuff a candle."

"That's a shame," Anya said, more or less sincerely, and then broke off as someone entered the powder room to join them. "Hello, Euphemia!" she said with robust welcome. "What a darling
The demon matron preened, looking at herself in the mirror and touching her wig with self-conscious satisfaction. "Anya. I'm glad to see you could make it, dear. You wouldn't want to miss the social event of the season." They air-kissed, and then Euphemia turned slightly, her gaze descending over Willow like a cool bank of clouds obscuring the sun. "Why don't you introduce me to your...friend." Unsaid went the word 'human', but her tone carried its faint whiff of suspicion. Grauth women had a more rigid social rule book than Grauth men, and some were inclined to snub their human counterparts--at least those who didn't come with a pedigree and an approved introduction.

"This is Willow. Willow, Euphemia. Euphemia's in my bridge club." Willow smiled a hello in her awkward way, and Anya went on, "Willow's a courtesan, but all her old clients have been killed or imprisoned. She's hoping to find herself a man. Preferably rich and not too terribly ugly."

Euphemia took an atomizer from her purse and perfumed herself with professional care. "You should reconsider your standards and cultivate an ugly man, dear. They are usually more grateful, and inclined to bestow extravagant gifts."

"I'll keep that in mind," Willow said, her face giving an amiable twitch that Anya didn't buy for a second. "Thanks."

"My first husband was appallingly ugly," Euphemia went on, rouging her cheeks now. "Bloated as a tick, with a face like a pudding gone bad. I couldn't look at him without wanting to put him out of his misery. Eventually I did, and became a very rich woman." She snapped her compact shut. "Kindest man who ever lived, though. Come," she took Willow's arm, "I'll introduce you around and we'll see if there isn't a fat fish to be hooked tonight."

Willow threw a desperate look over her shoulder as Euphemia swept her out.

"Good luck!" Anya called, waving her good-bye. "Have fun fishing!"

There was a lot of huddle room under the desk, a lot more than necessary, unless you were a man with very long legs. Or maybe unusually large knees, like, basketball sized. Whatever the case, Buffy was grateful, but she still nearly bumped her head when she heard a familiar voice.

"You look lovely tonight," Spike said from somewhere across the room. It was his silky, private, only-for-her voice. At least she'd thought it was only for her. Discovering otherwise filled her with a sense of outrage. "That's quite a dress," he went on, his comment followed by a silence in which she imagined his fingers slipping across someone else's velvet.

"Thank you," said a strange woman's voice, colored with a faint accent. "It was given to me for the evening. They like me to look expensive."

"I'd call it a rousing success then." Dryness flattened Spike's words.

Buffy frowned at the repartee. He sounded almost disapproving, and she sounded mocking. The tones no longer matched what Buffy thought of as normal flirting, unless she was dangerously out of fashion. Now that was a scary thought.
"There was a man asking about you the other day." The woman must have shifted or sat down; Buffy heard her dress rustle.

"Who?"

"A Grauth. Clude."

"Don't know him."

"He wanted to know what your tastes were."

"Oh?" A rude smile curled around the word, as clearly as if Buffy could see it. "What'd you tell him, love?"

"I told him you were into leather and toys, and that you liked to bite."

"Said that, did you?" A shadow of something passed through the vampire's voice.

"Was that wrong?"

"Not your fault, pet. Just that I'm not really the biting type these days."

There was another rustle of fabric--shifting, standing?--and then the woman said sultrily, "Not at all?"

Now that was flirting. Anger and itching curiosity finally propelled Buffy out from under the desk and to her feet. Across the room stood a human woman in a red dress that clung to every curve, outlining her body like a long exclamation point against Spike's dark uniform. Her hair partially obscured her features until she turned her head, revealing a face too perfect for Buffy's liking. Brown eyes, elaborately framed by shadow, widened in surprise when she caught sight of Buffy.

Spike wore the appalled look of a guilty man, or an innocent man who knows he will look guilty under the circumstances. He took a quick step back from his companion. "Slay--er, you there." He adopted a supercilious tone, superior to servant. "What are you doing sneaking about here, missy? Shouldn't you be passing out rodents or champagne or somethin'? Get back to work."

She came out from around the desk. "Give it up, Spike." Folding her arms, she looked her competition up and down. "Flashy, but I guess some guys like that. And I'd have to agree, expensive looking."

"Buffy." There was sharpness and warning in that one word. "This is Rosa. She's a friend."

"I can see that."

Irritation flashed across Spike's face, eradicating all traces of guilt. "She works for me," he said carefully, voice lowered to significance. He was trying to communicate something to her with his eyes, but she couldn't tell what and she was still angry, even if was more pose than poison.

"Gee, I didn't know you had employees. Works for you as what, exactly? An au pair?"

"She gets me information."

Rosa was looking back and forth between them with puzzled curiosity. "You have a girlfriend," she said. It wasn't quite a question. "You never mentioned her."
"Funny," Buffy said. "He didn't mention you either."

Spike sighed and moved with impatient self-restraint. "Yeah, all right. This is a very cozy little scene, but let's move on, shall we, before the guards come knocking us up?"

As the words left his mouth, the study door opened and a Grauth guard nosed in, pausing in startlement when he spotted them. "Sir," he said, straightening and saluting. It would have been a smart gesture if he hadn't been holding a semi-automatic, which smacked into a lamp and sent it broken and extinguished to the floor.

"Er, yes, Corporal--Sergeant--whatever." Spike gave a negligent salute in return. "Carry on."

The dismissal almost worked. The soldier righted the lamp and shouldered his gun, and looked prepared to back out and apologize for his clumsy intrusion, but then he hesitated. "Sir, this is Colonel Naziren's study."

"I am aware of that, soldier." The cloak of authority Spike's rank lent was a bit ragged at the moment, and he didn't sound particularly intimidating to Buffy's ears; nor to the guard, it seemed, who was giving them a dubious look.

The guard visibly nerved himself. "With respect...what are you doing here, sir?"

Spike drew himself up sharply. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm..." He paused, eyes flickering in an internal, brain-searching way as he dredged up words. "...having a bloody assignation, of course."

Buffy and Rosa exchanged a glance and flanked him with immediate support, winding their arms around him. "Yes," said Rosa in her delicate voice. "We were about to have sex." She hesitated. "On the carpet."

Ewww, thought Buffy. The guard just looked amazed. A beat passed and Buffy felt she should add something. "It's a really nice carpet," she perked, smiling at the guard with Buffy-Bot intensity. "Plus, who can ever get enough of these big, manly vampires?" She dug her fingers into Spike's ribs and twisted them with satisfying viciousness. "And their tight abs."

"Ow!" said Spike, recoiling.

"He likes it rough," Rosa confided, turning her own, more sultry smile on the guard, who stood mesmerized in the doorway.

"Yeah," Spike rallied, chin lifting with a jaunty flair. "I was fancying a bit of rough and a couple of tumbles. And now you've gone and ruined the moment, mate."

"Sir, I'm--I'm sorry, sir." The guard bowed himself out with enormous respect, closing the door behind him.

When he'd gone, Buffy pulled away from Spike and smacked him in the chest. "What the hell was that for?" he asked, putting on that wounded, baffled face she'd only seen, like, a thousand times. Been there, slapped that.

"What?" she snarked. "You like it rough. With the leather and the biting. And the toys." Behind Spike's back, Rosa tipped up the sides of her lips in a complicit smile.

"Look, it's not what you think."
"Save it." She didn't think it was anything, to be honest--Rosa was too cooperative for a real rival, and Buffy had begun to piece things together--but it seemed a betrayal of her gender not to put him through the usual hoops. "What are you two doing in here?"

"Just ducked in for a chat." He frowned. "You turn up anything yet?"

"No. I looked through his desk, but I didn't see anything that looks like plans for a Weimaraner."

"Wynariver," Spike corrected with a look that asked if she was putting him on.

"Whatever. I just call it magic-sucking-thingy for short."

Spike ignored this. "Keep looking," he said curtly, as if he were actually the boss of her, Big Vamp on Campus now in his uniform with the shiny trim, Mister Captain Pointy-Teeth. She gave him the Arched Brows of Excuse Me in response, but he'd turned to Rosa. "You should get back to the party," he said, taking her elbow and guiding her toward the door.

"No, wait--" Rosa unclasped herself before he could dispose of her, and turned wide, urgent eyes on him. "I wanted to tell you. That man who was asking all the questions about you--he's here tonight. He's at the party."

Xander came down the stairs empty-handed, without a plan. Namely the plan to a wynariver, which to him sounded like something you'd hang next to your socket wrenches and take down when you wanted to drill a hole in someone's head, and why did his brain go to these places anyway? Because it had a ticket to ride, that's why. It's a good thing he kept the thing attached to his spinal column, because if he stopped watching it even for a minute, he just knew it'd bust loose and hotfoot it off to Vegas.

As he passed down the hall, idly wondering what a real waiter would be doing about now, a hand grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him into a closet full of furs and evening cloaks. He went stumbling, reflexes primed to lash out, before he realized it was just Willow. "Hey," he said, "are you--"

"Do I have a big sign on my back that says, 'Will sleep with you for food?'" she asked.

He peered over her shoulder. "Not that I'm seeing."

Fiery eyes held his captive, while girlish hands waved left and right. "That's right! No sign! So, do I just look like a slut?"

There was only one answer to that. "Well, your dress is kind of low-cut--" Her eyes flared like the high-beams on a Mack truck. "But, of course, no," he finished smoothly, with the diplomacy of an old friend who does not want a fat lip.

"I can't go out there again, Xander," Willow said, pacing in the confines of the closet. "The mauling, the toe-crushing, the hunting stories--"

"Hunting stories?"

"It's like a school dance, but with demons." She paused, face arrested as if by remote control.
"It's exactly like a school dance."

"It does resemble some of my more colorful nightmares," Xander acknowledged. "Although I'm usually more naked, and sometimes my pencil breaks." He gripped her shoulders and squeezed. "Buck up, soldier."

"I really don't want to buck," she said dangerously, fists clenched.

"So don't buck. Look, if you don't want to go back out there, don't go."

She deflated a bit, while retaining a scrunchy anxious-face. "But we're all Mission Impossible, and I'm Cinnamon. I can't leave you guys in the lurch."

"Hey, when it comes to lurching--" And then the door opened, and he kissed her. Light from the hall fell across them, while she squeaked into his mouth and grappled with him in confusion.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tara asked in a low voice, managing to sound both ticked off and extremely polite.

"We thought you were a demon," Xander said breathlessly. Willow was adjusting her dress with fast and twitchy hands, speechless, her expression dazed and horrified.

Tara raised one skeptical, Spock-like eyebrow. "And you always kiss my girlfriend in front of demons."

"No, because--" He realized she was yanking his chain. Or maybe not. "I'm going to go now, because there are demons out there who need daiquiris and because it's more frightening in here. And by the way, no, I haven't found the plans." Xander slipped out, leaving his favorite lesbians in the closet. Back in the safe hallway, he spotted a furtive figure disappearing around a corner and decided anyone trying that hard to look nondescript deserved following. Stealthy as a cat, he dogged the other's heels, rounding the corner after a glance ahead to make sure he wouldn't be noticed. He found himself leaving behind the rich carpet and wallpaper for a more utilitarian corridor of white marble and plain, plastered walls. His skulker exited the building through a set of French doors, and after a few, carefully-timed moments, Xander did too.

Outside, crisp snow blanketed the ground and lined every surface, while ice-laden tree branches creaked above. His breath puffed white in the air, and he was briefly afraid it would betray him, like smoke from a campfire revealing him to the Indians. Breathing through his nose, he followed a trail of footsteps into a maze of hedges higher than his head until he heard voices, then crept close behind a concealing wall of shrubbery.

"Is it on?" a man asked.

"I don't like this, Sondi," said a second voice by way of answer.

"Like has nothing to do with it. We do what we must."

"But killing a Colonel--"

"Half breed. Human-bred dreffa," the one called Sondi spat.

Xander shifted, managing to find a gap in the hedge where the leaves were thin. He couldn't see much, no faces to put to the voices, but one man bore a distinctive medal on his uniform jacket, and Xander strove to imprint the design on his brain.
Sondi continued in a harsher voice. "When Naziren is dead at the hands of a human assassin, the Reich will have no choice but to contain the population. It will be the first step of many in rectifying the gross perversion of our destiny."

"Our agent is prepared," the other man said in heavy resignation. "He will strike tonight. It will be done."

"So what's this tosser look like? This--Clude, d'you say his name was?" Spike grabbed a drink off a passing tray and leaned against a pillar. Next to him, the fronds of a plant draped close, brushing his shoulder like an over-friendly drunk; on its opposite side, a pair of young Grauth women gossiped, emitting carrying tinkles of high, conspiratorial laughter. Their slippers seemed to barely touch the black-and-white tiles of the ballroom floor.

"Short," Rosa said, discreetly scanning the crowd over the rim of her champagne cocktail. "And he wears glasses."

"Geek, eh? Not spoiled for choice with this crowd." He noticed that Rosa's gaze now lingered on him and frowned at her regard. "What?"

"Your girlfriend...she's attractive."

"Yeah?" Spike said dubiously, waiting for the other shoe to nail him.

"And human," Rosa noted.

Spike looked away. "Most days."

"It's an unusual girl who would date a vampire...or is it? There's so much I didn't know before all this happened." She was looking out over the crowd again, and Spike looked with her at the waltzing demons couples, the colorful whirl of the women's skirts like a bleeding watercolor.

"Oh, she's unusual," he said dryly. He emitted a short, rough laugh. "She's--" He broke off, swallowing whatever he'd been about to say. Even he wasn't sure. Thoughts of Buffy crowded his mind: Buffy poised above him, sliding down his prick with her hair tumbling loose; Buffy in a rage, striking him senseless; Buffy smiling at him like a bright beam of sunlight captured in a slim, warm body. Buffy in kindness, Buffy in rage, Buffy in sorrow and a terrible pity. "She's like no other woman alive or dead," he said softly, eyes unfocused by the blur of color and motion that seemed to be sweeping his imagination up into a dance of longing. His voice was lighter than usual, his accent softer.

Rosa considered his profile for a moment, thinking how human he could look when the light was right, when for instance the globe of a lamp hung near his head, dusting him with its soft, grainy glow. In her world now, the dead walked. She made herself look away and gazed into her champagne. She'd had enough to loosen her tongue, and a languorous numbness was beginning to seep into her limbs. Even the bitterest things were sweet when you were drunk, as easy to tell as a story. She heard herself speaking aloud, with no real care for whether he heard. "When they killed my husband--when they killed Derek--I thought there could be no more love or goodness in the world. I wore his blood for days. At first I thought I'd gone mad--and then I thought that God's wrath had been visited on us, that devils had come for our souls."

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After a brief silence she looked up to find Spike's intense, frowning gaze on hers, as if something essential had been lost in translation. "They have," he said.

The dead had no need to be polite. In this, there was no surprise.

"Buffy!"

Buffy nearly dropped her tray as Xander came hurrying around the corner to catch up with her, and her gaze flicked up and down the hall to make sure they were alone. "What's wrong?" she asked, anxiety cresting in her like a wave.

After dragging her behind a statue of some demon hero wielding a sword of masculine overcompensation, Xander leaned in conspiratorially. "You won't believe what I just overheard."

"I will if you tell me."

"There's an assassination plot--they're going to kill this Naziren guy tonight. They've got some human lined up to do the deed. They want the Grauth to crack down on the human population--God."

His exclamation made her tense further. "What?"

"The human population." He shook his head in dismay at his own words. "That's us, Buffy."

Releasing a ragged breath, she nodded. "That's us."

"There was something else," Xander recollected, caught up by his thoughts. "They said Naziren was a half-breed, part human."

Buffy absorbed that for a moment, factored it into her immediate appraisal, then let it slide away for later contemplation. "Right now what matters is stopping the assassination--all we need is for the Grauth to beef up security. We can barely move around as it is." Anxiety colored her voice, along with the frustration of recent weeks.

Nodding his agreement, Xander said, "I didn't get a good look at these guys, but one of them was named Sondi, and the other had some kind of fancy medal," he gestured at his own chest, "with a dragon and an orb."

A dragon and an orb, Buffy thought, mind racing back through memory across all the medal-laden chests she'd seen that night and coming up blank. "Okay. Good. We'll look for that, and for this other guy--Sonji."

"Sondi."

"Right." Buffy squared her shoulders. "You find Tara and Anya, tell them what's going on, have them try to account for all the human men here--there can't be that many. I'll tell Willow and Spike."

"And Spike can warn Naziren," Xander filled in.

"No. If they find out a human's involved, they'll lock this place down tight and question us all. Our
covers won't hold up to close scrutiny."

Jaw tightening, Xander said, "Then again they might just kill us all and sort it out later."

"Exactly," she said, wishing that idea hadn't been placed in her head, along with an image of heaped, familiar bodies. "We have to take care of this ourselves. And we need to hurry."

Xander nodded, looking ready to take off on her command, then stalled in place. "Wait--what do we do if we find these guys?"

She hesitated, various options clicking through her mind like tumblers on a slot machine before she said, "We take them out." Buffy met Xander's eyes, conveying the firmness of her resolve, and saw him nod slowly again in return. And for one suspended moment out of time it took her breath away--his readiness, his loyalty, his acceptance of all things ridiculous and extreme and possibly fatal. She'd met him in high school, and taken him at first for just one more goofy guy with a puppy-dog crush, but here he was years later, battle-scarred soldier in a war they would never win.

On impulse she managed a smile for him, hoping it carried some fraction of her feelings. He didn't quite smile back, but his eyes were deep and reflective and she saw something in them that reaffirmed her purpose.

She needed that now.

Willow forced a smile at the demon waltzing her around the dance floor. He was an older fellow, with a jowly face and a pair of distinctive horns that curled down and along his temples like bicycle handlebars, and he loomed over her in his decorated dress uniform, a grizzled Beast to her Beauty, making her feel like a hundred-and-ten pound twig in gold lamé. His compliments didn't help.

"You dance prettily, little tree. Like branches in the wind, leaves whirling at your feet."

"That's, uh..." Nice, except nice thank-yous led to misunderstandings, which led to groping, which led to drinking, and from there possibly to drunken sea chanteys on the bar-top. "Hey, shiny," she said in a high-pitched, edgy voice. "Medals. There, pinned on your chest. What did you win that one for, the one with the, uh, giant squid getting gored by a...pterodactyl?"

He looked down at the one she was describing. "That was for my victories in the Gulf War."

Willow stared at him with parted lips for three mechanical dance steps, before bringing herself to say, "You were in the Gulf War?"

Her beast smiled reminiscently. "Yes, when the Great Gulf opened up between Grauth and the Dark Kingdom of Myrrhia, there was much warring and the blood of thousands rained down from the skies."

Good times, thought Willow. Good times. "Wow, that must have been...hard on the birdbaths. But, hey, good for the umbrella industry." The wear and tear on her own smile was becoming irrevocable. Would this song never end? Who knew you could squeeze so many instrumental solos out of "Stormy Weather"?
"You know, I had a concubine once who wore a wig of red hair, back when that was in fashion. You remind me of her, such a tiny thing."

"This is my real hair," Willow said, hitting an apologetic note. But there was no deterring him.

"No matter. Tell me, have you ever bathed in a pool of crushed *taula* juice while listening to the music of the spheres?"

"Not that I recall. Mostly it's wine coolers and top-forty...though, uh, I have been hit on the head a few times, so maybe I..." Across the room, through a break in the crowd, Willow spotted Buffy signaling to her. She was tugging on her ear-lobe with more force than was probably necessary, while rather impressively balancing a tray of glasses in her other hand. "Oops," said Willow, feigning a stumble. "I've turned my ankle."

"My fault entirely. Inexcusably clumsy of me."

Willow almost felt guilty as the demon led her with unexpected gallantry off the floor and to a couch against the wall. She took a seat and said, "This is nice, this is great. I'll just...rest a bit." After he bowed himself away into the crowd, she left her seat and met with Buffy, coming her way. Taking a glass of champagne as cover, Willow edged close. "What's up?"

In a low voice, Buffy said, "Xander overheard a plot to assassinate Naziren."

"Oh. That's good." The words came out automatically, because Willow couldn't think of what else to say. Who cared?

"No, that's bad. They've set up some human to do it, so they can--" Buffy broke off as a demon lady swept toward them. "That's right," she said loudly to Willow, "Champagne. Made with real American cham." The lady took a glass without a word and veered off to more socially elevated climes. "If it goes down," Buffy said, voice lowering again, "humans will take the blame. We could find ourselves under twenty-four hour curfew. Or worse."

"Reprisals," Willow said in dismay.

Buffy nodded. "If you get a chance, tell Spike to keep an eye on Naziren. He can't tell him about the plot, though, because--"

"Already there." They were too vulnerable out in the open like this, and Willow had a feeling the Beast's predilection for twiggy redheads wouldn't save her from a firing squad. She darted a few looks around the room to make sure they weren't drawing attention, and pretended to sip at her champagne as Buffy went on.

"We're looking for a human male with a death wish, and two Grauth, one named Sondi and the other with a medal--"

"A medal with a dragon on it, and an orb," Buffy finished impatiently. "You find anyone, come get me."

That tone irritated Willow a bit, but she swallowed it down and let herself drift back into the littoral of bodies that ran in loose clusters around the dance floor; the dancing lapped close to bystanders on waves of music and then slid away again, the women's skirts dragging across the tiles.
Trying not to be obvious as she stared at men's chests—there was a twist, for you--she worked her way almost entirely around the room without seeing a medal like Buffy had described. Back at the grand doorway, she dithered to a stop, worrying her restless hands against her dress and wishing she had just a pinch of magic left. One spell and she could illuminate the conspirators in a twinkling, she felt sure of it.

Glimpsing by chance a sharp profile among the flotsam of heads, she dove forward into the dark sea of tuxedos and tunics.

Spike, a dissatisfied look on his face, was waltzing with a pie-eyed Grauth debutante until Willow put an importunate hand on his arm and pouted, "You promised me this dance, William."

Brushed by hurrying waiters, the swinging doors to the liquor stockroom were never allowed to stop swinging, and when Xander noticed a short and very human-looking figure dart between them, he added his own shoulder to the momentum, barreled in after him, and threw him against a shelf.

"Don't kill me!" his victim yelped, half-strangled by his collar.

Xander loosened his grasp, recognizing the pudgy face and trying to put a name to it. High school. Clock tower. Swimsuit calendar. Bad thought, wrong thought. "Jonathan?" he said, startled to a gape. And then a rush of relief and bizarre, unexpected affection flooded him. "Man, is it good to see you." He clapped the guy on both shoulders.

Jonathan, still cringing from the attack, looked doubtful. "It is?"

"C'mon. How many surviving members of the class of '99 are there? We bested a giant snake demon together at graduation. Those bonds are lifelong." Xander stepped back. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm supposed to be getting olives," Jonathan said, inching away along the shelves. Behind them, another waiter breezed in, grabbed a bottle, and zipped back out through the flapping doors. As the light brightened a moment, it illuminated a bruise on the other man's cheek. Xander gestured at it.

"What happened to your face?"

Flinching away with a look of anger so swift that Xander almost thought he'd imagined it, Jonathan mumbled, "Nothing. Look, I have to go." Olives in hand, he pushed by, leaving Xander alone among the bottles, bemused and concerned.

For the first minute or so, Spike had held her at arm's length and danced like a marionette or a reluctant twelve year-old, but when she'd snapped at him to behave normally, he'd relaxed to a somehow sarcastic gracefulness, his lazy glides mocking her own less finished form. Willow glared at him, and he glared back, then they both looked away.
"Do you see any dragon-orby medals?" Willow asked.

"Yeah." Her heart quickened with startlement at his words. "Spotted one a while back. Thought I'd keep it to myself, though. What with you being such a soft and cuddly armful."

Gritting her teeth, Willow stepped hard on his foot in reply and almost stumbled off-balance into another couple as he jerked her through the next few moves. Smarting and deeply irritated, she said, "If I could turn you into a toad--" Her words dried up as Spike leaned in close.

"If you turned me into a toad, Red, I'd crawl into the princess's bed and stay there till she kissed me better." He smiled nastily. "Too bad your magic battery's gone dead. Not for the first time, I'll wager." The innuendo of his words was perfectly clear.

"I'll never know what Buffy sees in you," Willow seethed.

"Sure of that, are you?" He let one of his hands slide lower, to a place insufficiently covered by the sheer material of her dress. She stifled a squeak. Unable to zap the leer off his face, or the face off his body, Willow shoved herself free and slapped him across the cheek. Spike looked amazed, and nearby dancers paused to watch with interest, but Willow was already flouncing off, the steam of her temper trailing almost visibly behind her.

"Red birds," she heard Spike say in a carrying voice. "Can't keep 'em in hand. Always flying back to the bush."

Xander and Willow nearly ran into each other in a doorway leading to the back parlors. They looked at each other in surprise, hesitated with a shared awareness of the people around them, did a few rounds of the two-step side-shuffle, then passed on their separate ways. Xander thought Willow looked even more brassed off than when he'd seen her earlier, and if she didn't already know about the plot, he didn't particularly want to be the one to tell her.

"You there," said a voice. Xander, scanning for conspirators, didn't register the hail and jumped when a hand landed on his shoulder. It was the head butler. "What are you doing?"

"Right now?" Xander asked, buying time as he groped for a plausible explanation of why he was idling in plain sight.

The butler steered him over to an open bar. "Get back there and start serving drinks, you lazy piece of human meat."

"Meat reporting for duty," Xander said, faking good humor from years of practice. He began to mix drinks under the butler's steely eye, until the demon was certain of his obedience or bored with the show. Left alone, Xander was forced to wait on the dry-mouthed Grauth bellying up to the bar, but he realized quickly that the gig was useful to his purposes, allowing him to scope out chest medals and cock an ear at voices with the hope of recognizing one.

Within a minute of his tenure, Spike wandered up and leaned on the bar, elbow perilously close to tipping over a bowl of wet cherries on his uniform sleeve, a fact Xander didn't see a need to mention. "Blood-n-Beam," the vampire demanded, then deigned to notice his bartender. "And mind you don't stick your fingers in it. Can imagine too well where those've been."
I will not reply, I will not reply. Mastering his disgust, Xander poured the bottled blood into a glass and dosed it liberally with bourbon that he wished were poison. Not that poison would kill Spike, but it might give him a nasty hour or two, and wasn't it sad how low he'd come, pouring drinks for conquering demons and wishing tummy aches on vampires.

"Here you go, sir." Xander shoved the drink across the bar at Spike and not-so-accidentally splashed it down his uniform. Oh, yeah. Zing went the strings of his heart, with the satisfaction of a job well done.

"You bloody berk." Spike, after a stunned look at the damage, lashed out and hooked his fingers in Xander's shirt, pulling him along behind the bar so that Xander was forced to yield or be strangled. Bottles toppled over and the cherries went tumbling, while around them heads turned. "You can wash this up," Spike said, "and then I'll just have another drink." He smiled in a cold way and tilted his head, eyeing Xander's neck. "On the house."

Xander stumbled in Spike's grip out of the ballroom and into an alcove where a demon and his doxy were kissing. "Get out," Spike said, and they hastened to obey. He let go of Xander and stepped back, tension flowing out of his shoulders like water as he lit up a cigarette.

"What the hell was that for?" Xander said, straightening his collar and hoping it wasn't him making that squawk.

"What?" Spike frowned. "Thought you wanted a chinwag in private."

"No! I just wanted to spill a drink on you. Stop looking for ulterior motives." Annoyed and flustered, Xander thought about leaving, then decided it was time for his break anyway. He leaned against the wall. "Have you found out anything about the assass--" But before he could get more than a couple of asses out, Spike was in his face, a disturbingly cool hand clamped over his mouth.

"Do you ever know when to shut it?" He glared and took his hand away.

"We're alone. No one's going to--" A rustle at the curtained doorway interrupted them, and they both looked over as a guard poked his head in.

"Captain Aurelius," he said in surprise. His gaze registered the tableau and he cleared his throat. "I'll just--excuse me, sir. Again." The curtain fell as he retreated.

Xander looked at Spike, who looked back. Within a half second there was a safe three feet of carpet between them again and Spike was hiding behind a plume of cigarette smoke.

"I'm going to..." Xander gestured at the exit.

"Yeah."

With mutual relief they parted.

You'd think that it would be easy, tracking down one very ordinary assassin. No magic tripping you up, unevening the odds. But after an hour, Buffy had to admit that looking for one needling human in a demon haystack was no walk in the park. Unless the park was full of haystacks.
She halted a scurrying footman mid-scur with a hand against his chest. "So, is that a gun in your pocket or are you just really glad to be here?" He stared at her in befuddlement as she reached in and yanked out a--

"A corkscrew. Oh." She handed it back to him. "Sorry. Carry on." Sighing with frustration, she let him go and continued scouting the hall, hoping to run across a killer, or maybe someone with a tray of those little fishballs she'd seen earlier. She was getting hungry. "This search is losing its fruit," she said to herself. "I'm fruitless!" Pausing to look in a mirror, she touched up her hair and then tipped her head to one side dejectedly. "I need fruit."

Turning away from her reflection, she bumped smack into a bulky figure in uniform grey. "Oh! Sorry," she said, practicing the deferential tone of a maidservant. All she needed now was to be diverted from her search and sent off to wash dishes. The Grauth grunted irritably and started to shove past her, but Buffy had already seen, at nearly perfect eye-level, a bright gold medal with a dragon and an orb. As he passed, she kicked down hard on his heel and chopped the back of his neck. He fell to one knee and she hooked her arm around his throat, punched him in the side of the head, then dragged him toward a door which turned out to lead to the cellar. Handy. She released him to tumble down the stairs, and after a quick glance up and down the hallway, went down after him.

It was a wine cellar, dim and filled with racks of gleaming bottles, its floor rough concrete. Her prisoner lay in the middle of it, groaning. Buffy looked around and found a coil of rope hanging on the wall, just above a stack of small barrels. She took it down and tied up the Grauth, taking no care to be gentle. Once she'd positioned him on a crate, she stood over him, arms crossed. "Hi," she said. "Let's talk."

The demon shook himself and then strained at his bonds with an air of confusion. "Who are you? What do you want?" His eyes focused on Buffy as if seeing her for the first time. "Where's your accomplice?"

"My who?"

He was peering around the cellar, apparently trying to conjure more attackers from its shadows. "The one who hit me."

Buffy raised her hand. "That would be little old me." And since she wasn't likely to get through to him on credit, she proved her point by delivering a sharp blow to his jaw. "Though, really, not so old."

Blood was trickling from the Grauth's mouth and his eyes had narrowed. "No human has such strength. Especially not a woman." He spat at her feet.

Raising her brows at that Buffy said, "I'd give you my girl-power lecture with the accompanying slides, but I've kinda got more important things on my mind. Who's the assassin? And by the way, ick." Grimacing, she rubbed the toe of her shoe on his trousers.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Uh huh." Buffy struck him again. "You're not too terribly convincing."

"Neither are you," he sneered.

"Okay, you wanna play gloves off?" She hauled back and then stopped, fist poised. "You know what? I've got a better trick." Three short steps put her behind him, and she unsheathed the knife at
his hip, drew his head back by one horn, and held the blade to his throat. "Tell me what I want to know, or I'll cut my losses. Literally." His pulse jumped up toward the gleaming metal, visible beneath the grey skin.

"I do not think you will do it, little girl."

"Think again." Her hand tightened on the rough scabby surface of his horn.

"A true killer would look me in the face."

Buffy leaned down and made her voice soft. "A true killer knows not to get blood on her dress." The blade pressed closer, and the Grauth inhaled.

"I would die for my people."

No, no, no. That wasn't what she wanted to hear. Nobility was inconvenient in demons. Stupid, stubborn hell-spawn. "I'll see if I can arrange that for you," she said coolly, stuffing her apron in his mouth as a gag and using the strings to tie it around his head. "I'm here to serve."

Leaving the cellar, Buffy hurried toward the ballroom to find Spike. Though she hated to admit her own resourcefulness had limits, Spike might know who this guy was and who he palled around with. All that brass and attitude he wore lately ought to be good for something.

As she rounded a corner, she came face to face with another Grauth. It was like comedy, but without the laughs, she thought in exasperation. They both stopped short, mutual recognition dawning at the same moment.

"Slayer," Clude breathed.

Buffy's eyes widened as memory clicked: graveyard, carnival, spy. As he began to open his mouth again and turn, preparing no doubt to flee and trumpet her identity to the world--the kaleidoscope of dancers whirling just out of earshot through the doorway at the end of the hall--she sprung upon him, catching him around the neck and twisting it sharply. The crack sounded unnaturally loud to her ears, blotting out for several moments the spill of music and chatter while she dragged the Grauth into a closet and rolled his body under a swaying hang of coats.

When she straightened up from her task, the door opened with a blurry rush of illumination and perfumed air. Like a trap-door spider, Buffy grabbed her prey, muffling the person's tiny shriek and shutting the door on their encounter. With her free hand, she tugged on a cord and lit up the cloakroom. "Rosa." Relief made her light-headed. "What is this, Vaudeville night?" The words came out aggrieved and louder than she'd intended.

"Buffy." Rosa touched her throat, leaving her hand in a defensive gesture that was probably pure instinct. "I came for my stole."

"Sorry. I was just--" Buffy indicated the body silently. "Corpse."

"Oh." Rosa seemed to take this in stride. "It's that man."

"You knew him?"
"The one I mentioned earlier, who was asking questions. Clude."

Buffy frowned, thoughts rearranging themselves in her head like parts to an equation that didn't equate. "He used to spy on me before the invasion. I never knew his name." After a moment she shrugged. "Guess that's two birds, one stone."

The door opened and Anya poked her head in. "Hello. Why are you in the closet?"

"Get in here!"

With the aplomb that only a Dolce & Gabbana dress could lend, Anya entered. "Is this a lesbian thing? Because I could come back--oh, look. A dead body." She cocked her head at Buffy. "It is dead, isn't it?"

"Very, and what are you doing here, Anya?" As she spoke, Buffy pulled a heavy fur off the rack and draped it over the corpse to better hide her handiwork.

"I heard voices. Also, I was hungry." Anya withdrew a Kit-Kat bar from her purse, unwrapped one end, and began nibbling. Brows creased, Buffy watched for one bewildered moment, then shook her head, dislodging the distraction. She turned to Rosa.

"I need you to get Spike and bring him to the wine cellar. I've got one of the conspirators tied up down there."

"Conspirators?"

"Never mind. Just have him come as soon as you can." Buffy looked back at Anya, who was worrying chocolate off her lip. "Anya, can you--" She hesitated, not really certain what to tell Anya to do, but certain that Anya needed a purpose.

Anya nodded her head as if receiving some unstated message. "Get the plans to the wynariver. Check."

"What? You know where they are?"

"In some sort of secret meeting room upstairs," she breezed, still more interested in her candy than in Buffy. "An old man with extensive nose hairs is going to show them to me. I told him that blueprints got me hot and bothered."

"Anya, you can't steal them now--if this guy knows you've seen them, you'll be a suspect."

"Oh, I'll just take pictures," Anya assured her. She dug into her purse and put on a pair of black cats-eye glasses with rhinestone studs, smiling sunnily at Buffy. "There's a tiny camera inside the rim. Cunning, isn't it? I got them to take compromising pictures of Xander, because he never let me videotape us when...you know."

"And I so wish I didn't."

The cellar held a chill the rest of the house lacked, but Buffy had stopped noticing, and now the coolness and the quiet seemed to detach the room from the rest of the house entirely, as if there weren't any other living souls for miles.
Of course, only two here were living; only one souled.

"Yeah," said Spike, circling their demon captive, his head tilted at an angle of inspection. "'S what I thought." Buffy looked at him expectantly. "Don't know him."

"What good are you then?" Buffy griped.

"Hey! Doesn't mean I can't torture him." Affront flowed into a smile of anticipation, the planes of his face realigning into evil so smoothly and easily that Buffy shivered. He never had to vamp out to look scary--but if he was scary, why would she be feeling that bad, low-down ache?

"No torture," she said, as he prowled over to her. His arm slid around her and then down. Hand moving down, hand moving up, up her short skirt. "Torture bad." Her voice had turned breathless, and she felt herself flex against him in a kittenish movement while his hand slid into her panties. "This is so unprofessional," she groaned.

His forehead rested against hers a moment. Wicked eyes up close, thin wicked smile. "You don't get paid, love." She shifted and so did he, face not quite touching hers, but shadowing her movements in reverse, as if they might brush against each other, but not quite yet.

An eloquent grunt came from across the room and they both turned their heads to look at the Grauth, who glared at them as if he had a lot of comments stored up behind his gag. Buffy felt Spike's cheek caress her temple, sending electricity through the fine hairs and across her scalp. "Don't be in such a hurry, mate." Spike turned his attention back to Buffy. "Only got two hands."

He proved this for Buffy's sake and she gasped in delight. Looking at her rather than the Grauth, Spike said, "Watch how we take care of slayers around here."

Unable to find a single member of the Scooby gang, Tara pondered the very real possibility that some great plan was coming together elsewhere and everyone had forgotten about her. Fine, she thought, heaving a tray of crudites onto the parlor sideboard. She was perfectly capable of acting on her own initiative. All she needed was...some clue as to what the hell was going on. Sighing, she removed the empty tray she'd replaced and tucked it under her arm, then hugged the wall to avoid bumping into any guests on her way out.

Near the door she spotted someone familiar and brightened. "Anya," she murmured. The other woman's back was to her as she laughed, waving a glass with casual gestures as if to illustrate some joke. Champagne spilled over her hand and she exclaimed. Tara grabbed a napkin off a table and approached, touching Anya's arm lightly on the pretext of offering to help, but when the woman turned, she saw it wasn't Anya, but a grey-face demon in an elegant wig. The demon took the napkin without acknowledgment and turned back to her companions, while Tara backed away in disappointment.

She left the parlor, crossing one corner of the ballroom on her way to the kitchens, pausing just a moment to look out across the floor. The lights had been lowered as the evening drew closer to midnight, and there was currently a break in the dancing, filled by light chatter. Two men in tuxedos mock-jousted with candlesticks in to an audience of giggling ladies on sofas; near the bar, a short Grauth officer toasted victory to rousing cheers; and, almost close enough for Tara to stake, a vampire in a sequined evening gown snapped her fan and hid flirtingly behind it while her companion teased her. It would have all been charming, if not so terrible.
Outside the ballroom, a commotion was taking place, its scope wide enough that Tara couldn't pass without cutting straight through.

"She was supposed to be here an hour ago," a stout, well-dressed Grauth matron was saying to a bevy of butlers and footmen, all of whom looked eager to placate. "Her set is for three hours. That's what her sponsor's being paid for. It's outrageous."

"I'm sure she'll be here soon, madam." The chief butler's tone was soothing, his hands--clad in impeccable white gloves--steepled as if to implore her forgiveness.

"This is The Social Event of the Season." Tara could hear the caps in the woman's articulation of the words. "I will not have the Colonel embarrassed by--oh, Colonel Naziren."

Tara shrank back against the wall, trying not to call attention to herself as a slim Grauth in black dress uniform stepped into the fray. She'd heard of him a few times from Spike, who was apt to call him "the boss" with typical irreverence, as in, "Can't stop by tonight, kiddies, the boss wants me to clear out a K'thaba nest over by the docks," but this was the first time tonight she'd seen their host in person. He didn't look much like other Grauth; the small horns sweeping back from his temples were almost obscured by glossy dark waves of hair, and the ridges down his cheeks were all the more striking against the unusual smoothness of his face.

"Euphemia," the colonel said. "What distresses you?" His dark-toned voice layered politeness over impatience over a base note of cold power.

"Our star singer isn't here and she's due on stage. Tardiness is unacceptable."

"I'll have her shot."

Tara swallowed a gasp, and even Euphemia looked taken back. "Oh, Colonel, that's...very kind, but..."

He gave an almost imperceptible smile. "A joke, of course." Euphemia trilled nervous laughter, which was echoed by the butlers and footmen. Naziren's gaze wandered and caught on Tara. "Perhaps someone else can fill in for our missing chanteuse. You." Tara's heart tumbled over as Naziren called to her. "Come here." Feet dragging across the heavy carpet, Tara approached the cluster of Grauth, whose eyes all turned to her with varying degrees of doubt and interest. "Can you sing?"

"N-no," Tara said, with a vigorous headshake. "I'm just helping in the kitchen."

"Sing," he said.

Caught off guard by the abrupt command, she froze, but his eyes were implacable and she obeyed, aiming for a toneless croak that would dissuade further interest. "Mary had a little lamb--" To her own ears, her voice sounded faint and flat, breaking when he reached out and lifted her hair, letting it slide through his fingers with dispassionate curiosity.

"Get her a dress," Naziren said. "She'll do."

Cheeks flushed with the lingering traces of arousal and embarrassment, Buffy watched Spike slide
the blade further into the flesh underneath the Grauth's left horn. Years on the Hellmouth had hardened her, she thought absently. She'd once been afraid of that, and supposed she still was, somewhere underneath her new layers of skin. Maybe when they'd beaten back the latest army of darkness and owned the world beneath their feet again, she could afford the luxury of angst for her lost innocence. It would be nice to come home at night, go up to her bedroom, and have a nice, long cry among pictures of her mother and mementos of childhood.

"Now as I understand," Spike said, crouching next to the Grauth, one arm slung almost affably around his shoulders, "horns are important to your sort. Symbolic of manhood and pedigree and all that spiffy twaddle. Means nothing to me. Might as well glue a big penis on your head, I say. Put it all out there in the open--paint it bright blue if you like." He tapped the knife against the horn. "But I'm betting you're attached to this, isn't that so?"

The Grauth's gaze bore into Spike's with hatred. "You will kill me anyway. I know too much." He looked over at Buffy, mouth twisting in contempt.

"Yeah, but I can make it quick or slow. Your choice, mate."

"Slow."

Head cocked, Spike smiled in what might have been admiration. "Stubborn old tosser, aren't you? Right, then--"

"Spike, wait!" Buffy stopped him as the knife was poised to cut, and Spike stood. "He's just keeping us here." She was thinking aloud, realization coming to her as she spoke. "If he wants it slow, then there can't be much time left. We're not going to get anything out of him."

"You must be the brains of the outfit," the Grauth said in a low, snide jeer.

Spike looked over at him, eyes narrowing. "Yeah," he said, "she is," and the knife flashed out once with brute force, sending the demon's head toppling to the ground. "And I'm the pretty face."

The Grauth had died so quickly there was almost no blood, but Buffy grimaced at the remains. "We'll have to figure out what to do with him later." A glance to Spike. "You should stay close to Naziren, make sure no one assassin-like gets in range."

Spike tossed the knife down. "Right. What'll you do?"

Hiding her own utterly at-a-lossness, Buffy tipped up one shoulder. "What I do best."

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My. That was a lot of frogs.

Buffy stared down at the squirming bowl. "I think it's time for my break," she said plaintively. The frogs were crawling over each other in an attempt to escape their prison; as she watched, one flung itself into the air in a desperate hop for freedom. She caught the frog mid-leap in one hand and cupped its quivering body. Its eyes bulged in panic and it seemed to be gasping. "They're so cute," she said. "How can they be a delicacy?"

"Stop asking questions and pour the batter over them," the cook said, slamming a pitcher down on the counter near Buffy.
"You know," Buffy said, "when you found me, I was just on the way to the bathroom, and I didn't actually have a chance to..." She trailed off at the cook's expression. "I'll just...batter the frogs." She picked up the pitcher and held it over the bowl. "Sorry, guys. We're all making sacrifices these days."

"There's a saying old, says that love is blind. Still we're often told, 'Seek and ye shall find.' So I'm going to seek a certain boy I've had in mind."

Tara clung to the microphone stand for dear life with one clammy palm, demons swaying in her view, their faces turned to her with a nightmarish and weirdly romantic approval.

"Looking everywhere, haven't found him yet--he's the big affair I cannot forget. Only man I ever think of with regret." She took a deep breath, voice lifting. "I'd like to add his initials to my monogram. Tell me, where is the shepherd for this lost lamb?"

As the song trickled into his consciousness, Spike turned his head toward the stage with drawn brows, looked away still frowning, then did a double-take with wider eyes. Hell's bells. That was the little witchwife warbling up there, all sequined and tit-shy, looking like she wanted to dissolve into the stagefloor.

"There's a somebody I'm longing to see--I hope that he--turns out to be--someone who'll watch over me."

Her desperate eyes had picked him out of the crowd and she might have been singing directly to him. Nodding back to her, more amused than worried, Spike resumed his shadowy stalking of Naziren, who was strolling through the crowd, glad-handing the quality and inspiring the riffraff. Spike was forced to pause as some hoary old veteran buttonholed the colonel for a chat that threatened to drag out, which was when he noticed the human waiter veering their way with a tray of drinks.

Hastening his steps, he melted up alongside Naziren, positioning himself between Grauth and waiter. Naziren noticed his arrival. "Ah, Captain Aurelius. There you are."

"Here I am," Spike said absently, eye on the waiter.

"I hope you've been enjoying the party."

The waiter offered drinks, wilting a bit under Spike's black gaze before slinking away. "Jolly old time," Spike replied, riveted now on the glass Naziren was raising to his lips, as he tried to figure out a way to deter its progress. "Er, how are you? Sir?"

Naziren paused, drink midway to its target. "Very well, Captain. By the way, I've been meaning to thank you. The help you procured for tonight's festivities has proved most...satisfactory." The glass began to rise again.
"A spot," Spike said sharply.

His non-sequitur halted proceedings again. "I beg your pardon?"

Spike took the cocktail from Naziren, glaring at it with a venom once reserved for slayers, sodding poofs, and empty vodka bottles. "A spot. On your glass. Won't do." He dashed the glass on the tiles, eliciting a murmur of surprise from nearby guests, who nonetheless stepped away from the debris while politely ignoring its cause.

"You are diligent, Aurelius. But that really wasn't necessary." For the first time since Spike had known him, the Grauth looked almost nonplussed.

"I take my responsibilities seriously," Spike said, straightening up within his uniform.

"Quite." Naziren blinked.

From the corner of his eye Spike noticed more waiters zeroing in, drawn no doubt to the mess he'd made, and ready to provide more cocktails, any one of which might be deadly. "What say I make you a proper drink," he offered before thinking it through. "Somewhere quiet."

"Somewhere quiet?" Naziren's arched brow took in the party spilling around them. "Whyever for?"

Blanking, Spike stared back into the Grauth's expectant face. "Yeah, well...thing is, I've been meaning to ask you something...your advice." Spike's face cleared. "Your advice, on a bit of business. Private business."

"I see." Naziren smiled. "Then by all means, let us go."

White Russians seemed to be a popular drink among the young demon set, Xander observed. "Ladies," he said, sliding the glasses across the bar at two giggling damsels whose faces looked upholstered with the hide of an elephant's ass, if you stretched and ironed it a bit. Not that they didn't seem otherwise nice. And see, this was the problem; hang around demons too long and the tragic wrongness of the universe began to tilt and you started to believe it was all right, even normal. Like it would be somehow bad if he whipped out a machete and cracked them on their noggins, splitting them open right down the middle. One...then the other.

Xander tried to shake off the darkness of his thoughts, but it was like a tree trying to shake loose the wind. He wasn't bloodthirsty, wasn't a sick monster with delusions of righteousness. He was the right, because he was human. Right? Hey, it sounded good.

And the sun should fucking rise in the morning.

"Xander."

During his disturbing thoughts, Buffy had edged up to the bar, where she laid a tray of what appeared to be deep-fried--

"What the hell are those?"

"You do not want to know."
"What's up?" he asked, gaze skating around their immediate vicinity to make sure no one was listening, his hands towel-drying the interior of a glass as he spoke. In the background of his awareness, the band started playing "I'll Be Seeing You" and a woman's vaguely familiar voice floated across the room.

"We found one of the--recipes we were looking for."

"One of the recipes," he parroted, knowing he was supposed to get the code, and wishing as usual that someone would simply clue him in beforehand.

"Yes. It required chopping. And frying. It wasn't very good, though."

"That's too bad." If he pretended like he knew what she was talking about, what harm? She'd let him know what she wanted sooner or later. "Maybe it needed a dipping sauce."

"What?" Buffy looked at him strangely. "Never mind. Did you find any recipes?"

Okay, he'd figured that one out. "No dice. Still hungry. Speaking of which." Xander picked up one of the beer-battered monstrosities off the tray and took a bite. "Hmm. Not bad. Tastes like chicken."

"Oh, Xander!"

"What?"

Buffy's lower lip pushed out and she looked as if she might cry. "Nothing...I have to...ohhh." She more or less ran away.

"Women are odd," he said to himself, before tearing off another bite of his snack. He tossed it aside when Jonathan appeared, though. "Hey. How goes it?" The other man's pallor and dark-shadowed eyes concerned him. After all, they were both humans, and humans had to look out for each other these days.

"Hey," Jonathan mumbled, pushing several empty glasses off his tray. "Two martinis, extra dry, two Tom Collins, and one Balthazarian Bog-Blaster."

"You have got to be kidding. What's in that?"

"Don't ask me. I'm just the help." No laughing in the face of disaster there; the guy sounded bitter about it.

"Well, let me just pull out my handy Hitchhiker's Guide." Xander laughed, to show how it was done. Jonathan stared at him dully, with just the faintest trace of loathing to suggest that he might be doubting Xander's sanity. Or maybe, Xander realized a beat too late, his loyalty. "Why don't I just make those drinks now."

"Good idea."

Xander felt the need to establish some kind of rapport. They had plenty of history, twisted though it was, and besides, Jonathan was one of the few representatives of his fellow man that he'd spoken to in weeks, outside of what he'd come to think of as the compound. "Sounds like the occupation isn't treating you well," he said.

Jonathan made a sound, like a laugh shattered by a hammer. "What do you think? We're all going to die sooner or later. We might as well..." He clammed up, drifting back into his private funk.
"You know," Xander said, turning to search for some Collins mix on the shelf, "Buffy's here. If you're having any kind of trouble--" He turned back with bottle in hand to find that Jonathan had vanished. A flash of white jacket caught Xander's eye, what might have been the other man slipping off into the crowd. Alarms went off in his head. "Crap." He ducked out from behind the bar, tapping a passing waiter. "Hey, take over for a minute." And then he went looking for their assassin.

"...and it's taken longer than I expected, but I'm getting a bachelor's degree in Comparative Religion and World History, with a minor in Psychology," Willow told the glassy-eyed demon, secure in the knowledge that he would be too drunk to remember or care tomorrow what she said. She wasn't sure she was all that sober herself. She leaned closer, tapping him on the chest with one finger. "And what good will it do me now? The best career I can hope for is dance hall hostess or, or paid floozy." She gestured with her drink at the vast futility of it all.

"You could also be a maid," the Grauth said helpfully.

Willow stared at him in disgust. "A maid. I mean, okay," she caught herself, "I believe in the inherent dignity of any gainful employment. I'm not a snob. I don't look down on meter maids or waitresses or fry cooks. But I worked hard to be more than that." The Grauth nodded. He appeared to be gazing at her breasts. "And now I'm the underclass!"

"Willow."

She shifted on the couch and glanced to the side, where Xander hovered. "Hey there," she said, smiling with affection at her old friend. Her waiter. "Did you bring me a drink?"

"Uh, no. But you're needed...in the kitchen."

"Pfftt. I'm not a fry cook."

Xander reached over and took her arm, gently helping her stand. "No, but you are quite fried."

Willow handed her drink to the Grauth, who took it with semi-conscious readiness. "Bye bye," she caroled, waving as she was drawn off. "It was nice talking to--hey, take it easy. Ow." She rubbed her arm.

"Come on. I don't want to have to shave your head and disavow you."

"Where are we going?"

"I think I know who the assassin is."

That sobered her up enough to ask, "Who?"

"Jonathan."

The name tugged at her memory. "Jonathan...you mean Jonathan from high school?"

"Yep."

"Wonder Jonathan?"
"The very one."

Stumbling slightly, Willow rested a hand against the wall for balance. She could, in the fuzzy orbit of her senses, see Xander looking around as if afraid they might be causing a scene. "I don't have any mojo, Xander."

He focused on her, a bit impatient. "Will, pull it together."

"Why? You don't need me."

"I need you to find Buffy. Tell her what's going on. We have to stop him, or we're all going to be up a very deep and stinky creek."

As the words penetrated, Willow swallowed. She remained unsteady on her heels, but she'd been given an assignment and she could carry it out. "I'll find Buffy." She met Xander's eyes and a broken connection sparked, as if they were still two people who understood each other. But he just nodded and left her there, and there she stood, feeling at that moment like nothing more useful than a girl.

"What did you want to speak to me about?" Naziren asked, taking the drink Spike handed him.

In a haphazard, restless sort of way, Spike sat down. He couldn't keep his eyes from sliding toward the half-open door now and then, beyond which the party's revelries continued. "Well, it's about..." Stumped, he turned his gaze around the room as if something might inspire him. He noticed a cluster of photographs on a table, sepia-toned shots of demons, posed in gowns and suits during various leisure pursuits--lawn tennis, picnics, boating. In one a woman with a floppy hat smiled at the camera and held up a fishing line from which something other than fish dangled. Disturbing. "...about a girl," he finished.

"A girl? Really?" Naziren's gaze sharpened. He leaned back in his chair, one leg crossed over the other, a heavy tumbler of whiskey balanced on spread fingers. "I've been wondering what your type is. You're a mysterious fellow."

Once this would have been no more than a natural tribute to Spike's cultivated lifestyle and persona, but under current circumstances, it suggested that Naziren might have been poking around in his private life, looking for information. Not comforting, since he spent his off hours sneaking off to snog a slayer and plot the downfall of the Reich. "That so?" he said.

"Who is this dolly of yours?"

"Name's...Joan." By Prince Albert's bloody balls, he used to be a good liar. When had he lost the touch? "Heavyset girl, bit slow-witted."

Naziren's brows knit as if he were trying to work out a picture of this imaginary inamorata. "Indeed? Human?"

"Yeah...well, no. Dead now."

"I see. A vampire, then."
"No, just dead. Tragic fall off a church steeple. Before I was turned." Over Naziren's shoulder, Spike was unsettled to see his local ghost materialize like a pointed mockery of his words, her lackbrain face accusing him of sins he hadn't sought to commit. "Haunts me, you see," he went on, eyes narrowing at the spectre. "Terrible bitch in life, broke my heart. Don't know how I'll ever love again."

"I was given to understand...well, I suppose one seeks solace for a broken heart in different ways." Spike's Sunnydale ghost was circling the edge of the room, behind the furniture, as he tracked her progress. Following his gaze, Naziren asked, "What are you looking at?"

He forced his attention away. "Nothing. Must be a draft."

There was a knock on the door, and they both turned as a waiter appeared, poised on the threshold. "Sorry," he said. "I thought you might want service." His eyes shifted around the room in rapid, jerky fashion, and Spike's hackles lifted with instinctive wariness. He recognized the kid--had seen him a few weeks back in the officer's club, and before that too, somewhere he couldn't place.

"We're fine," Naziren said. "Leave us."

But the kid lingered, shoulders hunching with tension that showed equally in his pale, sweating face. One hand slid into his jacket pocket. Spike's eyes darted there, saw bulky angles where none should be. "I have a message for you," he said. "Sir." On a nearby table, a clock began to chime midnight.

"What is it?" Naziren snapped impatiently.

Spike rose from his seat just as the door was flung wide, Xander appearing there, slightly out of breath. "Sorry, sorry--excuse us, wrong room. Jonathan." His voice lowered, took on pressure. "You were supposed to be getting more ice. Go. Now." For a moment the kid stood rooted to the spot as if he might ignore the order, but then he slumped and trudged out. "Sorry," Xander said again, meeting Spike's eyes. "We won't disturb you again."

The door closed behind them.

"Aurelius, please. Sit." Spike sank back down obediently as Naziren studied him. "You know, I encourage all my men to take regular leave. It reduces stress, rests the nerves. A few days off might be in order."

"Let me go," Jonathan complained, as Xander hustled him down the hall past Grauth who paid them no attention, and thank god for that. Buffy and Willow appeared as he was shoving the other man into a quiet stretch off the main corridor, between the cellar door and the entrance to the ice garden.

"Here's our Manchurian Candidate," Xander said, giving his charge a little shake.
Buffy gazed at Jonathan with a terrible look, mixing pity and judgment, the kind of look Xander always hated to get and was glad to have trained on someone else. "And yet something tells me he knows exactly what he was doing," she said.

"You have no idea what you've done!" Jonathan said, wrestling himself loose and playing a glare across them all. "I was going to...to..." It was clear the words didn't quite want to come.

"You were going to kill him," Buffy spelled out. "We know."

Jonathan's dark, tortured eyes fixed on her in disbelief. "Then why did you stop me? I wasn't afraid to die!" There wasn't so much bravado in him as resignation.

"They were using you, pal." Xander felt a pang of sympathy. He took the gun from Jonathan's pocket, examined it briefly, then tucked it away.

"They were going to use a human attack to justify cracking down on all of us," Buffy said. "If you'd killed him here, right in the heart of high society, you'd have set off repercussions that you can't even begin to imagine."

Shrinking under her words, Jonathan whispered, "I was just trying to do something. Anything. I thought it would help." He looked nearly ready to cry. Xander put his hand on the other man's shoulder, squeezed.

"If you really want to help..." He glanced at Buffy, who made an almost imperceptible sign, then turned back to Jonathan. "I think we can find plenty for you to do."

Anya descended the staircase in grand fashion, slipping her ritzzy spy-glasses back into her purse and snapping it shut with a sense of accomplishment. Noticing appreciative looks directed at her from the men arrayed below, she shook her tailfeathers a bit, one gloved hand sliding down the rail. It wasn't so wrong to enjoy a party, especially if you could combine your pleasures with an agenda of politically correct espionage.

She lifted a glass of champagne from a tray as she glided by, drifting toward the edge of the balcony overlooking the ballroom. After a moment, someone joined her, and she looked over. "Oh, hello."

"Hey." Willow leaned gently on the rail. A sigh gusted out. "We found the assassin." Her voice was very soft, even though no one else was nearby.

"Oh, good."

"We've got a new recruit and a couple of bodies to squirrel out of here, but I guess we're further ahead than when we started tonight." She paused, shoulders writing a downcast line. "I still wish we could've found the plans for the wynariver."

"Didn't Buffy tell you?" Anya patted her purse.

"You found them?" Willow's face lit up with a trace of her usual excitement. "That's so great!" But her enthusiasm ebbed as quickly as it had come, leaving a dry cynicism. "Now we just have to figure out how it works and how to counter it, all without using magic." Brooding commenced on
Giving her a critical eye, Anya said, "You look peaked." She held out her glass. "Here, have a sip of this."

Willow winced, her hand gently diverting the offer. "No, thanks. I've had enough for tonight." A glance twitched Anya's way. "Peaked?"

Anya lifted one shoulder in a shrug, dislodging a satin strap. She admired her own pale arm and the jeweled bracelet dangling from it, its links so fine they snagged the tiny hairs along her wrist, and she watched the light rippled in concentric rings across the surface of her drink, broken by rising bubbles. She wasn't supposed to have alcohol, because that was bad for the fetus curled up inside her like a prize in a cereal box--but could one glass hurt?

"I'm only going to have one glass," she said aloud, reassuring herself.

"Okay." Willow sounded puzzled, but didn't question her.

She sipped her drink and it tasted like music, music rising in bubbles from below. "That singer has a lovely voice," she observed. Anya could just make out the glossy hair of the woman on the stage, and the glitter of the sequins on her dress, though the strong light surrounding her blurred her features into a white mask. "I think I've heard her on the radio."

Next to her Willow straightened up and gripped Anya's arm. Anya looked down at it, frowning but not yet ready to voice her feelings about unwanted pain. "Hey," Willow said, "that's--that's Tara."

"Really? I didn't know she'd recorded any--"

"She's not supposed to be up there!" Willow stammered out, anxiety stringing through her voice.

Anya considered this. True enough, but why the fuss? "It doesn't seem like a bad gig." Flinging a tense and not entirely nice look Anya's way, Willow hurried off without another word. "A lovely voice," Anya repeated to herself with philosophical composure, then lifted her glass in a toast to the song.

Hands lifting the sides of her skirt, Willow clattered down the stairs, nearly tripping over the treads in her haste, flinging curses at high fashion as she went. They'd been so caught up in the whole plot thinginess and poor Tara had been up there who knew how long, trapped on stage and forced to sing and she hated even talking in front of people, she'd always been so shy, and sure, that'd changed over the years, but this, now, in front of demons--it made Willow a bit sick to her stomach.

She reached the curtained alcove behind the stage just as a song was ending, its final strains bleeding out, leaving the pure notes of Tara's voice hanging there. After a moment there was silence, and then applause. Willow worried nervously at her long gloves, shoving the fingers up and down until she shed one entirely like a snake skin. She didn't even notice.

Tara was coming down off the stage, and Willow felt a tightness in her chest give way to relief. She moved forward to meet her lover, who appeared sudden and full-bodied and glowing from her exertions and the heat of the stage lights. She grinned at Willow, who nearly flung her arms around her in happiness. But there was still a risk of demons coming by, so she settled for grasping Tara's
upper arms and holding her in place.

"You're okay!"

"Oh," Tara said, still grinning, "I'm great! Did you hear me?"

"I did," Willow said simply, charmed by the other woman's goofiness, her own smile unhiding itself.

"How'd I sound?" She was almost jittering with uncharacteristic delight.

"Terrific, of course! What were you doing up there?"

Tara tossed her hair, which slid back lightly across one shoulder. "The other singer didn't show up, so they asked me to fill in--or, well, told me to." A faint, rueful look.

"Okay, I'd'a been having the big freak-out."

"Well, I did. I kept forgetting the words. But after a while, it wasn't so bad." Tara glanced back toward the stage. "I have another set to do after this." Willow hid her amusement; there was an almost professional note of commitment in that statement that Tara seemed unconscious of. "But then I should--" She broke off, lips parted in startlement, and Willow mirrored her glance.

"My dear," said Euphemia, coming in with arms outstretched. Willow stepped back and put some discreet distance between her and Tara, the object of this affection. Two other Grauth dogged Euphemia's heels, males in tuxes, one with eyeglasses, the other fronted by a very unGrauthian-looking mustache. "You were wonderful out there. Brava, brava." She clapped a few times, light applause echoed by the other demons.

"T-thank you," Tara said, her previously strong voice dimming under this attention.

"Clearly you've been wasted in menial labor." Euphemia's hands were raised as if frozen on their last clap, but now she gestured to one side. A Grauth gentlemen bowed himself forward. "This is Major Strauch, who runs our Officer's Club--and many other fine establishments in town." The major inclined his head at the compliment and Euphemia smiled at him, then back at Tara. "He'll be your new patron, dear."

"Patron?" Tara said faintly, beginning to look as sick as Willow suddenly felt.

"You will be a prized addition to our stage," the Major said. "We will make you the toast of the Reich."

Tara turned stunned eyes Willow's way, but the plea in them was nothing she could answer.

The End
I still do appreciate feedback. I recently answered some e-mails. Not yours, I can hear you thinking, but the intentions are still there. Some I fear to answer, because they have dust on them, and mouse tracks, and were written in quill on parchment.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
Episode 13 — Devices and Desires

Chapter Notes

Thirteenth episode in an alternate season 8, with an AU season 7 in between; everything branches off from "Gone." Standard disclaimers, for the love of Joss who said go forth and write fan-fiction.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the steam baths, rank disappeared. At least you might think so if you were ignorant, young, foolish. Naziren was none of these things. Men stripped off the trappings of rank, but rank never disappeared. Across the bath from him, General Nilec leaned back against a step, a wet towel draped around his shoulders while a young human woman rubbed lotion into his bald scalp. He was grizzled, muscle tone loosening in his arms, his eyes framed by ridges that thickened with every passing year. But he hadn't slackened his grasp of power, and Naziren didn't drop his guard.

When he was still in the academy, Naziren had killed another student in a duel. They'd been sparring for months with words, the spiteful wormling insulting his mother and his bloodline, while Naziren in turn cast aspersions on the worm's intelligence, character, honor, and tailor. One day when Naziren was returning from the practice fields, entering the academy by one of its long archways, he saw ahead of him on the flagstones his gryalf, dragging itself along by one good set of talons, the rest of its body twisted and wet with blood. He'd stopped and stared but he hadn't gone to it. For a moment he thought the weather had changed around him to winter, but it was his own coldness, and he felt the attack before it came, saw the shadow of the sword across the stones, even though later he realized there could have been no shadow. The light was wrong.

He'd worn his defeated adversary's wig for weeks afterwards, hating it but determined to adhere to tradition and make the most of his victory. To this day he carried around a lock of the silky false hair, ribboned in his pocket like a keepsake of love. Naziren often reminded himself that an enemy's attack can come at any time, and that the man who holds hostages to fortune is setting his own trap.

"I'll never understand," Nilec said, "how the puny human spirit can imagine and create such magnificent devices. Saunas, rollerball pens, Palm Pilots, skyscrapers. And these--" Naziren opened his eyes to slits to see Nilec holding up his fluted drink. "Mimosas, they call them. The color comes from the juice of oranges."

"Humans are like ants," Naziren watched Nilec sip his mimosa. "They achieve en masse more than each could alone." He didn't believe that, but it was what the general wanted to hear. Sketching likenesses between Grauth and human nature would be unwelcome and unwise, even if their plans for humanity did extend to absorbing its brightest members in one way or another.

"Oranges must go on the import list," Nilec mused while inhaling the fruity scent of his drink. "A weekly truckload, at least, until we can accommodate growth."

Naziren never overlooked an opportunity to gather intelligence. "The Civic Defense Barrier will remain open then?"

"It must. We are not yet self-sufficient, and privation is spreading." The sourness in Nilec's voice
told Naziren everything he needed to know. Self-sufficiency had been their goal; hydropods and
hothouses had been established in guarded locations all over Sunnydale, but their success so far
had been limited. "The past week's runs have gone without incident. They will continue."

Even Naziren wasn't immune to the lure of visions conjured by this news. He pictured the vast
supermarkets and legendary malls of Los Angeles, row after row of motion pictures, electronic
toys, sugared figs, automobiles. It was human decadence, and it might be their downfall, but he
wasn't prepared to judge a thing decadent without first sampling it.

"Would that our plans were entirely without incident," Nilec went on, and Naziren lifted his gaze
and smiled. He'd been waiting for the purpose of their meeting, something more material than
oranges and the social excuse of a steam room. The general's clipped tone said he'd reached his
point. "Liyoge is worried. One of his officers has gone missing--a member of the surface force,
Illamar Clude. I want Intelligence to look into it."

The surface force had paved the way for the invasion, but were not considered combat-trained; its
members had earned nominal posts in the New Reich, largely clerical. "He's important?"

"He is nobody. But he helped recruit the vampire."

Aurelius was always 'the vampire' to Nilec, an epithet laced with suspicion and distaste. "Ah." This
was enough to hook Naziren's interest, because wherever Aurelius was, a whiff of slayer hung
near. He wondered if Aurelius had killed Clude--he could hardly be blamed if so. This world, like
the many below it, overflowed with mediocrities, wastes of skin and air. Of course, Aurelius didn't
need air. But the principle applied. Aurelius was like him; a man who'd improved beyond his
origins, who saw opportunities and sank his teeth into them.

"Find out what happened to him, Colonel."

Naziren nodded. "Yes, sir." Behind the general, his human servant massaged his shoulders now,
her hands close enough to snap his neck if she'd had the strength. "And the slayer, sir?" The girl
didn't even look up--perhaps the word meant nothing to her. The general, however, glared over the
rim of his drink.

"The slayer?"

"Should we continue the search?"

"Have you found her?"

"Not yet."

"Then your question is pointless. Borrow men, do what you must. But, Naziren...don't let your
failures undermine your successes. You have many obligations commanding your attention." A
smile deformed Nilec's lips, muscles resisting their own effort. "Intelligence is the nerve-system of
the Reich. If you're having trouble fulfilling your duties, I can fill your post at any time." And fill
the ground with you, he left unsaid.

"I'll double the squad seeking the slayer," Naziren said, unconcerned by the threat. Standard
management techniques. He picked up his own drink from the seat next to him and considered it,
wondering if there was a way to make the ice stay cold while the room stayed hot.

"Whatever it takes."

"Rest assured we will find her, general. She is one girl, cut off from anyone who could help her."
Slayers work alone and think with tooth and claw, like animals. They don't act strategically--and they don't raise rebel armies."

The slayer's sweaty man-child was fighting up a storm. Spike couldn't help but notice, especially when that storm chucked a body his way, nearly knocking him off his pins. Unbalanced, he fell forward a step into the arms of his opponent, who grabbed as if to steady him. Their eyes met during the false embrace, the Grauth looking startled and then afraid. He was struggling to disentangle himself and unholster his gun when Spike snapped a bite from his neck, stripping the flesh down to glistening bone. Like elephant hide, with an aftertaste of WD-40. He spat, let the body drop, and turned to gauge Harris's progress.

In the dim, forgiving glow of the alley lamps, the human seemed less of a lightweight than usual, body jerking in a graceless way like a puppet's on invisible strings but evading the worst of the guard's blows. Before Spike could decide whether to help or light a fag, the other man's knife blade flashed once in a compelling arc that left the Grauth's neck and the Grauth himself gaping at the insult. Spike watched with interest as the demon staggered toward him, one bloody hand trying to hold his neck closed, the other outstretched. For a moment he thought he might have to move back a pace, but the timber crashed a few inches short of his boot tips.

"Neat job," Spike said, impressed enough to say so. Xander, not looking at him, crouched and wiped his blade clean on the guard's coat, then sheathed it.

When he stood, the light fell on his face and Spike thought it looked deader than his own. He'd got his magic mirror now, had a reflection to compare, and Xander was white as the moon on a ghost's fingernail. Stubble and shadow edged his jaw, like an artist had been too rough with the charcoal.

"You've got something on your..." Xander finished the thought with a gesture. Spike raised his brows and touched his own face, spreading gore across one cheek with his fingers, then took out a handkerchief and swiped at the mess. It wasn't as bad as it could be. "Good thing they've got low blood pressure," Xander said, echoing his thoughts with a deadpan--almost vampiric--display of humor.

Spike cracked a laugh, feeling tricked into it, and Xander's attention drifted a few degrees right. "Behind you," he said with no change of expression. Swiveling his neck, Spike saw a figure at the far end of the alley, twenty feet away. "He'll sound the alert." Xander's voice was tense but steady, like Angelus when he was warning of some ambiguous danger, possibly a threat, possibly an amusement.

With a little growl of menace, Spike sprung down the alley toward the guard, who was fumbling to lift a whistle to his lips like a London bobby from a time before walkie-talkies and cell phones, when a single piercing shrill would bring runners out of the fog. Back then you never wanted to scrag the constabulary--far too risky, for too little gain. It was different now though, the killing permitted, righteous even, and Spike flew at the guardsman on boot soles that barely touched the ground and dropped his hand between mouth and whistle the moment before they could meet.

"Sorry, old chap." The whistle crumpled in his fist, along with a few demon fingers. "Can't let you do that."

"Sir!" Recognition came from the Grauth in a gasp that Spike made his last, twisting his neck to
one side with casual savagery.

A presence at his shoulder made him shift and snarl, lips drawing back from his teeth, but it was just Harris, eyeballing the body with a connoisseur's interest. Spike let his face shift and settle.

"Sir!" the boy said, in a voice mild enough not to carry, then grinned at Spike as if it were the best joke ever.

That was...weird. Which of them was he mocking? *Split the difference*, Spike thought, preparing to bare his fangs again before he remembered he couldn't kill humans. Nothing like a behavior-modifying piece of government metal to help you keep a sense of humor. And it wouldn't do him any good with Buffy if he offed the cheeky bugger. The way to a woman's heart was occasionally sideways, through her friends.

Besides, not that he was keen to admit it, but there were other reasons for keeping Harris around. He wasn't an entirely yawning expanse of patheticness these days, and Spike had gotten into the habit of taking his existence for granted, the way you learn to accept your lady love's annoying pets.

Relaxing his hackles, Spike offered a "Piss off." As a social gesture.

"Yet another species of demon that doesn't go poof," Xander said, who'd returned to studying the body. "Inconvenient. Your kind now--self-cleaning, like an oven. Speaking on behalf of humans, we appreciate that."

Spike yanked the corpse up by its uniform front and tossed it behind a dustbin, out of view of anyone who might pass on the sidewalk. He was already moving off when he realized Xander wasn't following. Turning, he saw the other man kneel by the body, knife in hand, and slice open its tunic. The silver buttons holding it closed clinked against the blade.

"What are you doing?" Curiosity made his tone almost polite.

"I've been thinking," Xander said, baring the Grauth's chest. "We need a sign. Something that says, 'Demons go home.'" He caught Spike's frown. "Like Zorro--champion of the oppressed--leaves his signature on evildoers--a scar in the form of a blazing 'Z'--yadda, yadda, yadda."

The poor sod was one couplet short of a sonnet, Spike thought, and tilted his head to watch in interest as Xander slashed a squiggle into the cooling skin. The dubious results didn't exactly convey threat, more like palsy. "What's that then--some kind of vicious eel?"

"It's a snake," Xander said, biting off the last word. "Don't tread on me." He considered his handiwork with grim satisfaction, then shined a testy look at Spike. "It's an American thing. You wouldn't understand."

"What, sic semper tyrannis and all that?" He narrowed his eyes at Xander's expression. "I had a public school education, you dozy Yank twat."

"Sure you don't want to nab a few teeth?" Spike asked. "Maybe an ear?" He grinned an evil grin. "Be a nice new hobby for you. All serial-killerish and colorful. More fun than collecting stamps."

"I'm not you, Spike." Xander's temper flared with unexpected force. "I don't kill for fun." His reaction called to mind the lousy old days when taunting was Spike's only way to keep his hand in and his edge honed. He'd always been able to count on the kid to kick up a pretty fuss. Snipe his
wobbly manhood or scorn his taste in beer, it was all the same game, same results. A slow simmer, then a blast.

Spike eased into the human's personal space and didn't overlook the slight flinch. "Not so sure about that. I saw you a minute ago, all gingered up and goin' for the throat like a hungry fledge." Xander averted his eyes, but Spike could hear his heartbeat pick up, his breath hitch. "Got a fire in your belly these days. You might as well--" Stiffening, Spike scowled at the visitor. "Sod. The hell. Off!"

"Hey!" Xander's hands came up to square off an irritable defense. *I'm* not the one making unrequested editorials."

"Not you," Spike said, waving at the haunt, who stared unblinkingly back. "Stupid bint keeps following me around all Banquo's ghost, trying to pitch a sob in my chest because I--never mind. Not important."

Xander's hands stayed up, fingers spread wide like butterfly wings. "You are so freaking loco. *What* the hell are you talking about?" His gaze traveled in circles around the alley, passing over the spook without pause, though she was less than a foot away.

"You can't see her." Spike's per diem of patience was draining fast and he spoke in distinct syllables. "She's a specter, a phantasm, a revenant."

"A ghost." Xander tipped his head, and Spike imagined the feeble clink-clink as two cheap coins of thought rubbed together. "You're being haunted--wait--you're being *stalked?*" As the information sank in, his amusement seemed to increase, but when Spike didn't answer, his smile dipped and flattened. "So who'd you kill?"

"No one," Spike said tightly.

"Oh yeah," Xander returned in a casual tone Spike didn't buy. "She's someone else's memento, but she's just got a little crush on you."

"Could happen."

"You're such a liar."

When Xander began to turn away, Spike shadowed his movement with a sidestep and nearly bumped chests, locked into a reflex of anger that he disguised with a smirk. "So are you, pet."

Xander returned his stare, but he said nothing.

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Dawn missed her puppy. Okay, she'd never actually had a puppy, but she could picture him in her head, a golden retriever with big clumsy paws and eyes lost under a sleepy overhang of fur. He'd leap on her when she came home, painting her jeans with mud, and she'd scold him, *no no no*, but his happy yips would soften her willpower to mush and she'd pick him up, cuddling and cooing while he licked her face. She'd name him Sunshine or Toto or Happy, or something else less ironic.

With her luck, some vamp would have him for dinner just as she got attached, or Angelus would come back and do those horrible things she wasn't supposed to have ever heard about. But she
wanted a life where things at least had a *chance* of being good, where there wasn't twenty-four hour darkness and demons with guns on every corner. Where she hadn't been ripped out of her home and sent scurrying underground to live in some dank ex-military facility that might as well have been a prison, where rats nibbled your toes at night.

They'd all die here, and Dawn would record each stupid, pointless death one by one. *Dear Diary,*

*another shooting today...*

There should be a pool, she thought. And everyone could place their bets to predict the next one to go after Kerry and Jason. Maybe it would be her. She'd be gone, ripped apart by bullets or fangs or dogs, and people would cry a bit, but who would even make it on a commemorative stamp? Oh, no. She'd be gone and the universe would ripple and smooth out again, because she wasn't even supposed to have been here in the first place. She was the invention of screwy old monks who clearly hadn't given any thought to the existential havoc they were wreaking.

Dawn hunched her shoulders and drew up her knees. She had a bad attitude, according to Sister Buffy Know-It-All, which was why she sat on the sidelines writing sour nothings in her diary (not her old pink one with the Powerpuff Girls, but a tattered and grubby collection of paper she'd knifed holes in and bound together with twine), watching the training session instead of letting Buffy boss her around with everyone else.

Surreptitiously, to uphold her pretense of uninterest, she followed the movements of the others with her eyes. The practice room had been sectioned off in a corner of the Initiative bay, its hard floor covered with mats stolen from the university gym's supply lockers and transported through the tunnels over the course of one exhausting night. The mats were stinky, but in a familiar and reassuring way that reminded her of P.E. class; people's feet made soft thwapping sounds as they tried to imitate Buffy's combat demonstration. Jonathan, the clumsiest, was turning moist and pasty with effort, but huffed unstoppably as he mirrored a series of kicks. Dor and Marcos were acting all tough, giving hi-keeba shouts in complete seriousness as they extended their legs.

Dawn wanted to roll her eyes, but couldn't quite muster the derision. Buffy thought she wasn't taking things seriously enough, but she was. She just didn't lay high odds of kicking a machine gun out of some grey-neck's hand. Against guns you needed other guns, and like everyone else now she wore one on her hip, loaded and ready. Besides. She had cramps and didn't feel like shouting and hopping around today like some big lame-o.

"Balance!" Buffy yelled, effortlessly storked on one leg, her body tipped down and sideways as she monitored her followers' performance. "Don't lock your knee--let your weight come to rest on the ball of your foot. Watch the torque!"

At the end of the row, Kethas wobbled on one sneaker, jerked his head up to see what he was supposed to be doing, and overbalanced into a heap on the mat. Buffy straightened, looking impatient with this failure. She clapped her hands once to stop the group's kicks, and like a line of chorus girls they came to attention. With a few words she instructed them to pair up for combat moves and then took a defensive stance across from Dor, lasering the girl with cool eyes.

Dawn's head dipped again as she wrote. The sound of flesh hitting the padded mats started up again, and the high, choppy notes of Buffy's voice seemed to match the scrub of Dawn's pencil across the paper. It was almost relaxing. *I wish Tara were here,* she wrote. *I worry about her all the time. She shouldn't be out there playing spy games. She can't even do magic.* In the background, bodies danced and grappled. Dawn hunched her sweater closer around her shoulders against the ever-present chill that their space heaters couldn't dismiss.

*I feel like the world turned upside down, everything flipped from heads to tails like a bad coin toss,*
Something cracked, a scream tore the air, Dawn's pencil skittered off her paper, and everything came stumbling to a halt on the mats. Dor sat on the ground cradling her arm and crying. "Crazy bitch!" she wailed up at Buffy, whose face had opened up into a wide, anxious expression that Dawn never liked to see. It meant things had spun out of her sister's control.

"Oh god, I'm sorry," Buffy said. She dropped to her knees and reached out to examine the girl's arm. "Dor--"

"Stay the hell away from me!" The crack of Dor's voice was almost as sharp as the sound of bone breaking.

Dawn pushed to her feet and hurried over. The guys were just standing around in dumbstruck confusion, while Willow called, "What's going on?" as she left her work to join them.

"What did you do?" Dawn asked, displacing Buffy from Dor's side. The arm wasn't horribly mangled, but it was starting to swell. Dor kept it bent inward like a coat hanger, tucked close to her body as she rocked in place to comfort herself.

"I was deflecting a blow. I misjudged." Buffy's voice had quieted as if she'd already accepted the injury as some normal accident. It should have settled Dawn's own fears, but they boiled up into blistering anger. She wanted to punch her sister and make it count, show her how it felt, but she would never be able to do that. Ever. She hated being the youngest Summers, the freak in human shape who had to be protected by everyone, the non-slayer.

"You should try to be more careful of the little people," Dawn said coldly. Next to her, Dor sniffled and glared in wet punctuation. "The rest of us weren't chosen to be mutants with troll-like muscles."

She didn't look at Buffy's face to see if the blow was successful.

"Here, let me see," Willow said, kneeling and gentling Dor to turn toward her, lift her arm. Buffy rose, ignored by the others except for Jonathan, who gave her a direct and unexpectedly understanding look. Unable to take comfort, she walked away. Slayer tension still coiled in her body, asking for release. She resented Dor's inept fighting, Dawn's sibling grudges, the amateur and pointless nature of their rebel efforts. Her own most of all. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done something with the certainty it was right.

Her body felt over-heated and thwarted. Standing in the middle of the Initiative's vast, abandoned base, hearing the other's voices echo off the concrete, she felt for a moment that she was lost in some underground parking garage, and she thought about malls. Manicures, hair cuts, iced lattes. She could barely imagine L.A. any more or the social butterfly she'd been, flitting from party to spa, tanning bed to swimming pool, attending classes only to see her friends and so that someday she could make a stylish living as an event planner or personal shopper. She'd left all that behind, and after every night spent in a graveyard it seemed further and further away. Each night spent turning off her feelings, killing things who'd once been her friends and teachers and neighbors, she moved closer to understanding death, until she dreamed only in the shadow world.

If she'd been less of a social butterfly, would slayerhood have become this group project? She treasured them, they were her family, but being a part of them just gave her more opportunities to let people down. She didn't want to hurt people or get them killed as she tried to figure out the best plan, as clumsily and messily as if she were trying different recipes for chicken cacciatore. People weren't chickens; you couldn't experiment and there weren't any to spare. She could throw herself
away though, and that's how she wanted it to be--a leap from a tower, one grand gesture to save the world. Slayers were supposed to do that when the time came; the knowledge resided in her bones. All this intrigue and guerrilla fighting meant she'd failed to head the enemy off at the pass and would it be so very wrong to blame Willow? Who'd diverted history? Who'd kept Buffy from doing her job?

The apocalypse was spreading. They had no handle on it, it was getting away from them.

Buffy's heart was beating to be let out of her chest, but there was nowhere for it to go. Her feet took her toward the exit anyway; when all other plans failed, she could still patrol, covertly in her fake signum, masquerading as a good little third-class citizen of the Reich.

"Hey," Xander said as, half blinded by distractions, she just about smacked into him. He was carrying a box and she forced her gaze up to meet his, afraid of seeing questions there and being asked to explain herself. Let the others tell the story.

She would have brushed past with an excuse; then Spike stepped into sight. His uniform always froze her for a second as her instincts processed whether or not he was enemy, and on her hesitation he swept in, cape swinging with a flourish worthy of Darth Vader. His boots held a fresh polish, the kind you could get for a single dollar from one of the human boot-blacks now lining Main Street, and his cheeks held the flush of fresh blood, which you could purchase by the glass anywhere. He clasped a cardboard box in gloved hands that had broken a thousand girls and he nodded at her, eyes dipping below the brim of his cap like a flirtation. There was a freckle of blood on his jaw.

"What's wrong?" Xander asked. His flat tone made her look at him again, focusing for a moment as she tried to pry out what was behind it, but his face said nothing. His eyes were dark and his cheeks were chapped from the cold, and he had on jeans and a red plaid jacket that brought to mind some farmer just coming out of his apple orchard, except that she could see the strap of his gun.

"Dor broke her arm." Buffy paused, then forced herself to say, "I broke her arm."

"Oh." Xander paused too, as if something were expected and he couldn't figure out what, then moved away toward the nearest table with his box.

"Tough luck," Spike said with perfect indifference, but he tweaked a tiny frown at Buffy before following Xander, and she let herself pretend for a second that he was concerned, for her sake.

Drawn by curiosity despite herself, she joined them at the table. "Supplies?"

Spike made only infrequent visits, sometimes with trumped-up excuses and a gleam in his eye, but more often with food and provisions. He could snap his fingers and requisition the most expensive delicacies from the city's dwindling stores--pears preserved for months by magic, tins of cocoa mix, Hostess Twinkies--no questions asked. He could throw handfuls of Grauth dollar-sticks at vendors, sweep groceries into a sack and hand them to Xander in the middle of the street in full view of anyone and say, "Eat up, precious, you're looking peaked." No one blinked.

"Sort of," Xander said in answer to her question, and gave Spike an odd look she couldn't interpret. He opened the flap on one box then stepped aside as she stepped up.

Buffy stared inside, recognizing the contents several long seconds before understanding reached her brain. She reached in and lifted out a purple cable-knit sweater, and had to twist to catch a falling hairbrush whose tines had caught in the weave. Her hairbrush, from her dresser at home. Her sweaters and blouses, folded neatly, and under them a randomness of items that her hands sorted through: rolled socks, perfume, Mister Gordo, a bone-handled knife that Giles had given
her, a framed photo of her and Willow and Xander, a picture of her mom....

She held the last item, the unexpectedness of her mom's smile shocking her, making tears well up. Spike's voice beat against her ears in little snatches, like surf coming and going against rocks: "...grey-necks rolled in...your place...bloody Mardi Gras, but I cleared them out...saved what I...sitting around, gathering dust...meant to bring them by sooner."

With the picture in her grasp, she pushed past them and ran.

"Well, that went swimmingly," Spike said, casting a glum and baffled look after Buffy's retreating figure. "Thought she'd be pleased."

Proving that all men, even dead ones, were dumb when it came to women. "She misses her home, Spike," Xander said with an edge of anger, then released a sigh. "She'll be okay." He tacked on the reassurance before he could catch himself. "Just give her some time."

Absently returning a sweater to the box, he thought how annoying it was that his only male friendship was with Spike, tried to discard the word friendship, and felt it cling like a wad of flavorless gum. He stole a glance at the vampire, who was still brooding like the Angel knock-off that he was. Not even a germ of a soul to his name. It made you wonder. What if it wasn't the soul that got them, but the girl?

"Where are you going?" he asked, as Spike dithered on the threshold of the tunnel down which Buffy had fled. The vampire was looking into the darkness, and for a moment he almost passed as normal boyfriend material, just another confused guy faced with tears, unsure whether to stay put or pursue. "Trust me," Xander said, which earned him a glance. "Don't. Those were the tears of a solitary Buffy."

"Yeah," he acknowledged reluctantly. "Not like her, though."

"Haven't you picked up a few crumbs of insight about female behavior in the last hundred years?" Spike furrowed his brow at him. "Didn't Dru ever cry when you kissed her?" That came out more caustic than intended. Vive la snark. "I mean, wasn't she a bit girlish and unpredictable sometimes?"

"Sometimes?" Spike repeated with a flat laugh and a scowl. "She was utterly bat-rafted barmy. Cried at everything or nothing--when she broke a doll, a neck, a nail." After his first burst, his words slowed to remembrance. "Twisted herself up like a handkerchief, all white and weepy. She'd stay like that for days, plucking posies from thin air. Wouldn't eat anyone I brought her--"

"You know what," Xander said, holding up his hand as a stop sign. "Question retracted."

Dawn came over, bundled in a heavy sweater with her hands tucked into opposite sleeves, and her hair in plain braids that made him think of Laura Ingalls Wilder as played by Melissa Gilbert on Little House. Not that he'd had a crush on Laura or a fetish about pig-tails, though if he had, that was perfectly normal for a ten-year old boy. Come to think, Willow's childhood infatuation with petticoats ("Do you think they wore anything else under there?") now made a lot more sense.

"What's this?" she asked, reaching one thin hand toward Buffy's things, then drawing it back.
"Odds and ends of Casa Summers." Spike shoved the other box closer. "Got some stuff of yours here too, Nip."

"Yeah?" Dawn tossed her braids, playing it cool, but her face shone and she gave in with a sudden, grabby gesture and a hop. "Gimme!" Several squeals followed as she unpacked girlish underthings that Xander tried not to look at and dearly wished Spike hadn't handled. He turned the suspicious eyes of a big brother on the other man, who rolled his own and shrugged.

"Now there's a proper reaction," Spike said, barely getting the words out when Dawn yelped, "My fluffy pens!" She extended a handful of tufted, candy-colored markers toward Xander with a gleeful grin, then tossed them aside to dig further into the box.

Spike slid out of her orbit and Xander did too. He looked over at where Willow was fixing a sling around Dor's arm, before turning his attention back to the less living. "Hey," he said, "are you--"

But Spike was a pair of heels vanishing into one of the security boltholes that riddled the underground base.

Xander went along (he had the padlock key, and it just didn't pay to argue) and they climbed without speaking to emerge in the shrubbery. Spike dipped into his pockets and drew out cigarettes and lighter. Xander, for lack of anything better to do, watched.

"New brand?" he asked. He was the master of small talk.

Spike held up the cellophaned pack: black, bearing a red dragon whose wings circled up to touch tips above its head, the label trimmed in gold, promising "Victory."

"Official state cigarettes," he said dourly. They exchanged a rare glance of dry understanding and no comment.

"And where exactly do our demons grow tobacco? In the sunny subterranean fields of Hell?"

"Dunno. One of the many mysteries." Spike tapped a cigarette into his mouth.

"Maybe I should take up smoking," Xander mused, as Spike cupped his lighter. "Of course, I still have working lungs." Dark eyes glinted at him, and after a deep inhalation Spike handed over the cigarette. Smoke ebbed from his lips and nose like plumes of brimstone. What the hell, Xander thought, giving it a few tokes while Spike watched with a tolerant, smileless amusement that should have been irritating but didn't even break skin. The smoke burned just as it had the three other times he'd tried this, and he kept it up until he coughed, then handed it back.

"Thanks. That hit the spot...no, wait, I think it ran through the spot with a burning hot poker."

"Don't worry. Other vices in the sea."

"Murder. Mayhem."

"Hummels. Quilting."

Xander focused on wry not-smiling, somewhere in the direction of not-Spike. Leaves rattled in the trees above, and the smoke of a distant bonfire was carried to them on the wind. They both turned their heads at the same moment, squinting off into the darkness, listening, but there were no screams.

"You smell that?" Xander asked, knowing that if he could, the vampire had already beat him by a nose. "Fire."

He realized he'd been gripping the hilt of his knife, and forced his hand to relax and slide free. "I didn't want to kill anything else tonight anyway."

Spike tipped his head and cut his eyes down again, smiling at some private joke. After another contemplative drag on his cigarette he said, "You know...you and I are a lot alike, Harris."

"In what warped, parallel universe that is so very not this one?"

In the ensuing pause, Spike's face grew startled as if he'd just heard his own words. He took a deep, cleansing breath and nodded. "On second thought, scratch that."

Anya had been in waiting rooms before and she knew that waiting was the purpose of the rooms and the people in them. That didn't make it any less stupid. Waiting was boring and hard on the nerves, especially when you were surrounded by strange pregnant women and you'd forgotten to bring a book. She folded her hands and looked over at the lap of the woman next to her. It was a massively fat lap, as if a watermelon had crawled up inside and were trying to burrow out of the woman's chest.

"Does that pass the time?" Anya asked, nodding at the woman's lap--her knitting, actually--and feeling indescribably anxious about how the needles flashed and clicked and clacked so close to her little unborn spawn, and what the hell could she be making that was red, tubular, and four feet long, a chimney? "I've thought about taking up knitting, because there's so little to do now in the evenings, with no more broadcast TV. I've been reduced to watching Xander's tape collection." She was talking mostly to herself, one listless finger corkscrewing her hair. "I started keeping a log of the historical inaccuracies in Xena: Warrior Princess, but the binder got too heavy. The dental hygiene alone..." She trailed off. "Knitting, though. Is it fun?"

"It keeps me from going insane," the woman said.

Anya took another, closer look at her. The woman, more a girl, had hair that wisped the edges of her face the way cotton candy gathers around the sides of a floss bowl, then flared into long curls. At the crown, three months of outgrown bleach marked the date of occupation as clearly as a tree ring. Her face was wide and low with over-plucked brows and cupid lips and to Anya it seemed as if she'd hung a vacancy sign behind her eyes months ago and left no forwarding address.

"You aren't from around Chernigiv, are you?"

The woman dragged a blank stare away from her knitting, letting the needles pause at Anya's question.

"From the eastern bank of the Dnieper?" Anya went on, brightly seeking common ground. "It's just that you remind me of an old friend--old, old, old friend, really--who used to work the northern Ukrainian regions. Beautiful country."

"I'm from Dayton."
"Oh." Anya politely removed her attention as she mulled over the snub, and let her gaze wander across the other inhabitants of the waiting room. So many big-bellied pregnant women in one place made her feel like just one more pod among pods, existing merely to split open some day and deposit a ripe, messy lump of life on the ground like the women used to do in Sjornjost, the rabbit-cursed village of her birth. She herself barely showed yet, she decided after assessing her own stomach. That was something.

But the dull, downturned faces of the other women were freaking Anya the hell out. Every one of them looked ill-used and ready to toss herself off a bridge. She'd seen their type thousands of times during her vengeance career, and the itch to drum up business remained strong even after retirement. Worse, their grimness made her dread the next seven months to come.

"So how far along are you?" she asked the woman next to her, desperate for distraction.

"Three months."

"Oh my god!" It was like some kind of horror story, like Aliens or The Fly, and damn Xander Harris for keeping his extensive video library in the shop cellar. Anya boggled openly at the belly, which apparently had some kind of mutant agenda of its own. "That can't be normal."

To Anya's confusion, the woman's face softened. "You poor thing. Haven't they told you?"

"Told me what? Who told me?" One hand instinctively pressed to her stomach, fingers splayed.

"...Jenkins? Anya Christina Emmanuella Jenkins?"

Anya tuned in to the official voice that had been calling her name. "Here," she said sharply, getting up from her chair to face the nurse with her clip-board and smock and salad-bowl hair cut. Her name tag declared her "Alice."

She let Alice escort her into the doctor's examining room, where framed Monet prints hung on pastel walls like memories of happier times.

"I appreciate the doctor seeing me on such short notice," Anya said, hopping up on the examining table at a gesture from the nurse. She talked as her blood pressure was taken. "I didn't have an ob-gyn lined up and of course, what would it matter, since all the human doctors are god knows where. But I'm sure Doctor Lyrwor knows what he's doing. It's all the same no matter what the species, right? You push and shove and the man holds your hand like a big ape if he even bothers to come at all, and after some screaming and cursing out pops this bloody, bawling infant who in the normal course of things will someday make you regret ever riding the rooster in the first place."

"You can roll down your sleeve."

"The doctor--he's good, isn't he?" Anya took sudden hold of the nurse's hand, feeling like a girl of twelve again, pleading for reassurances from the village midwife. "Lady Elked recommended him and I--I didn't know anyone else."

Nurse Alice withdrew her hand and glanced toward the door, then looked at Anya as if she wanted to speak her mind but didn't dare. After a moment's hesitation, she said, "If the baby is meant to be born, he's as good as any." She left with an abruptness that gave no time for a response.

"Well, that's cryptic and not at all comforting!" Anya yelled after her. Left alone, she twisted her face in indecision rubbed her hands absently across her belly. During her brief wait she noticed a rack of demonic medical instruments on the wall, and underneath it a shelf of flasks filled with...
unlabeled potions. The human skull on the end didn't elevate the confidence rating of the collection. As she was descending from the table with the intent to bolt, the Grauth doctor came in.

"Sit," he said gruffly without lifting his eyes from the chart he was reading.

"You know, I'm feeling much better now. It was probably just a bad clam, or--"

"Sit."

She sat back down and let herself be circumnavigated with a cold stethoscope. The Grauth told her to breathe deeply and listened while she did. When he'd finished this, he examined her abdomen, thick fingers moving with care across her skin. The professionalism took the edge off her nerves; the intimacy sharpened them again and made her shudder.

"This doesn't look good at all," he said, straightening and giving her a cold glare.

Anya's heart lurched. "What?!"

"I'm not seeing the progress I'd expect, given your condition. Your chart says you're two full months along. The fetus should be much larger as it enters its third trimester." He used a poster on the wall to illustrate his words, tracing its images of fetal development with one finger. "By now, the augmentation program should have stimulated the baby's growth."

"Augmentation program," she repeated, confused.

"Adherence to the program is critical. Your previous doctor should have told you all this. If you haven't been taking your supplements, you have put the baby's life at great risk. Participation in the program is an honor and abuse of its terms a crime against the Imperial State." He paused, studying her with narrowed eyes. "The life of every Grauth child is sacred."

"There's been a misunderstanding. I'm not in any program. It's not a Grauth baby, it's a human baby. All human."

"That nurse is an idiot," the doctor said, curt and annoyed. "Wait here."

But that was enough for Anya. She slipped out of the examining room after he'd left, heading down the hall in the opposite direction of his retreating white coat and then making her way out the back. "Free government medical coverage, my ass," she muttered to herself as she took the stairwell. She should have known better. There was no substitute for a good midwife.

"They asked me how I knew--my true love was true--I of course replied, something here inside--cannot be denied. They said, some day you'll find, all who love are blind--when your heart's on fire, you must realize, smoke gets in your--"

"Enough, enough," called the show director, clapping grey palms together. The tinkling piano that had been easing Tara through the verse fell immediately silent, and Tara hung onto her microphone stand with a sweaty palm, awaiting another criticism.

It wasn't her singing this time, though. "The seamstress is here," Malivia said. Her impatient finger snaps harassed Tara off the stage and over to where she and a tiny, pin-tucked crone stood waiting.
"We must get this eyesore fitted properly." It was hard to tell whether she meant the dress or Tara.

Malivia pulled at the shoulder straps of Tara's gown and gathered the fabric tighter to her bosom as she showed the seamstress how she wanted the gown altered, pinching enough skin in the process to provoke a yelp.

"I don't know if it can be salvaged," she said in a tone befitting tragedy. "But we will try."

Tara rubbed the sore skin above one breast as if by sympathetic magic she could genie her troubles away.

"Wipe that sulk off your face," Malivia ordered, and Tara obediently schooled her face to show nothing instead of whatever expression it had been wearing that the Grauth decided to interpret as a sulk.

"Yes, ma'am."

Fuck you, ma'am, Tara thought as she followed the seamstress to the dressing room, wishing a pestilence of boils on Malivia and wishing even more for magic to back up her hex. She hadn't had such evil thoughts since high school when Vaughn Finley used to trail her down the hallway with torments and cat-calls.

If this occupation didn't end soon, she feared her aura might never come clear.

Once in a while when the sun was high overhead, you'd have reason to enter a dark building: you'd stand on the sidewalk and open an exterior door, daylight blossoming into the dimness, and it would take several moments for your eyes to adjust, to distinguish drapes from walls and chairs from the people in them. Now Willow couldn't remember the last time she'd stepped from sunlight into shadow. Darkened theaters and clubs used to be like caves, or oases where people took refuge from the unending California heat; now inside was no different from outside, both blended together in monochrome. Even the neon sign hanging over the side entrance of the Peacock did little to dispel the night.

"It was nice of you to bring cookies," she said to Buffy, glancing at the brown paper bag her friend carried as they crossed the threshold of the club.

She was pretty sure she'd managed to say that without a grudging tone, but Buffy ducked her head in what Willow recognized as the standard Summers apology for inadequate gestures. "I know she probably eats better than we do, but..."

"But she's not eating with us," Willow finished. Soreness made her add, "Plus there's that whole mortal peril thing."

Touching her arm, Buffy stopped her at the edge of the stage, out of sight of the white-jacketed waiters who skirted empty tables, setting them up for the evening ahead with pristine napkin teepees and vases of night-blooming jasmine.

"Will, you know how hard this is--for all of us. Don't make it harder."

Any hardness was in Buffy's voice though, and it was unexpected. Willow had prepared to hear
more regret and gotten resolve instead. "I'm the one making it hard? You put my girlfriend on the front lines to sing and dance for demons and spy and maybe get killed, but I'm making it hard."

"I took advantage of an opportunity--"

"Oh come on, let's speak plainly. You took advantage of her, Buffy."

Buffy clearly regretted having spoken. "We shouldn't do this here," she said, looking around for anyone who might have overheard their conversation.

When a moment's tense face-off turned to silence, they continued to Tara's dressing room aside a narrow corridor that ran behind the stage. A human man passed wearing a shabby vest over rolled-up sleeves and carrying a footlight; when he glanced at their sign Willow experienced a fraught second of possible betrayal and exposure--just one of dozens like it in any given day--and then he disappeared behind them without challenge.

The world had become an old black-and-white movie, war and intrigue and a chanteuse in the wings, and Willow wished she could walk off the set as a director yelled "Cut!" and then wake up next to Tara in her dorm bed, risking nothing except a reprimand from the R.A. for minor infractions of snuggling against student housing policy, and she'd say, "I had a dream you were singing in a nightclub, and there were these demons...." And they'd giggle about it and kiss and have frosted corn-flakes and go happily to class.

It wasn't lost on her that she'd made this world through inaction.

Buffy knocked on the dressing room door, pushing it from ajar to open with her knuckles. "Hey," she said, and Tara turned slightly, careful not to pull her skirt from the hands of the small woman who crouched at her feet, pinning a hem.

Tara's eyes went straight to Willow, and Willow put on a smile and almost dredged up enough heart for a cheery greeting, then a lump came to her throat and the moment got away from her. Tara smiled back though, in a guarded, hopeful way.

The dressing room was small, crowded with racks of gowns, a folding screen, counters of make-up jars crushed cheek to cheek, and a divan hiding under a distraction of flung robes and throw pillows. Only the dressing table mirrors and lights made the room look larger. Willow's eye was drawn to a vase of red roses. What had seemed a profusion was merely a dozen, but there was a card tucked into them, unopened. Rage blossomed in her chest with enough force that she almost raised a breath of magic, only to feel it throttled as the nearest wynariver kicked in. The flowers remained unblasted and she seethed with a sense of her own impotence.

"We just came for a quick visit," Buffy said with a clear, carrying voice and a glance at the seamstress that indicated the words were for her benefit. "Old friends, bringing cookies." She handed the bag to Tara and they exchanged significant eye contact over the seamstress's bent head. "Fortune cookies," Buffy went on. "Sorry. It's the only kind you can find these days. For some reason there are, like, a million of them left. But hey, they never really go stale."

Tara smiled again in a perfunctory way, then glanced down at the seamstress, her face revealing a flash of cold anger so unlike her that it took Willow's breath away. "You can go now," Tara said, as commanding as a queen, something close to a sneer in her voice. When the woman rose her human heritage was obvious, making her Grauth features all the more horrible. She left the room without taking her kit, but closed the door behind her. Tara sank down into a chair, and Willow and Buffy followed suit.
"That woman. Is she--what is she?" Willow asked.

"Niche," Tara answered, the word so plain and blunt that she was clearly over-familiar with it, though Willow had never heard it before. "Part human, part Grauth. She's a family retainer of Malivia's."

"Wait," Buffy said. "She lived...down there? How is that possible?"

"Humans in hell?" Willow said with a half-shrug. "Not so much new."

"They use human beings as servants." Tara fiddled with the clasp of a necklace as she spoke, working it between her fingers, across the satin lap of her dress, as if hoping to break it in the semblance of an accident. "Having Grauth blood is a sign of prestige. She thinks she's better than us," she said with a little chin jerk at the door through which the seamstress had left. "The niche call our kind mud-dwellers. Rude old bitch." At their startled expressions she complained, "She jabs me with pins every chance she gets."

"Poor baby," Willow said gently, reaching out to squeeze her hands.

"First we learn about this treatment to Grauthify humans," Buffy mused. "Now we find out the Grauth started spiking the punch before they even got here."

Tara quirked her brows. "Is that important?"

"I don't know. You don't hear about many demons mixing with humans."

"The Grauth do have a racial supremacy thing going." Disgust entered Willow's tone. "You'd think they'd want to keep their bloodlines to themselves."

Buffy grimaced and shrugged. "Guess they like sharing the wealth." Attention wandering, she gave a critical pass to the dressing room then refocused on Tara. "So you're doing okay here? Because if you think you're in any danger, we'll pull you out."

Willow thought she saw a shadow of annoyance pass over Tara's face, but a second later it was gone and she was smiling reassuringly. "I'm fine. They don't beat me or anything. It's just..."

"What?" Buffy asked with a worried edge.

"It's like they're letting me drink from their water fountain, but they always remind me of it, you know? All they see is human skin, not me. I'm just this exotic freak." A little tremble touched her words.

It was hard not to simply yank her up and out of there, but Willow took a deep breath and squeezed her hands. "They're demons, sweetie. They're the underclass, they just don't know it."

Tara pulled her hands away, a flush rising to her cheeks. "Does it always have to be us or them?"

"You know me. Anything to help the war effort." Tara stood, turned away, and began brushing her hair in the mirror, all with quick sharp movements, an eloquent dismissal that made stupid tears rise and brim, a flash flood of misery that Willow struggled to blink down.
A man was filling the oil lamps along Canal Street as they cut through the park on their way from the club, and a horse-drawn carriage passed them in the opposite direction, traces jingling. A Grauth officer and a lady cuddled in the passenger seat, collars of fur coats pulled high against the winter air; their laughter tapering off as the carriage vanished around a bend of the path. It was as if time had been rolled back.

"She hates me," Willow mourned, her earlier temper with Buffy put aside after the turn of her lover's mood. "We left her there, and anything could happen. Did you see those roses? Some old grey-neck probably has a thing for her, probably sends her flowers after every show with creepy love notes. What if he asks her up to his room? What if she can't say no? She can't even do magic!" Real distress tore the words from her.

Buffy forced her to halt. "Okay, first, if she hates anyone, she hates me. And second--" There was an almost deadly hesitation before her voice firmed. "If some Grauth hits on her, she'll hit back, and she'll get out of there. She knows the tunnel routes, we've got it all set up." Linking her arm through Willow's, she drew her back on track.

"I need to figure out the wynariver. We have the plans--it should have been a snap to come up with a neutralizer. If we can't do magic, we might as well give up."

"You'll figure it out. We'll figure it out."

They walked for a moment, and then Willow asked quietly, "What was in the cookies?"

A sidelong look said Buffy was assessing her, maybe to take her emotional temperature. "Names. Grauth officers who frequent the club. If we can start establishing their routines and their," a little indrawn breath, "tastes, we might be able to use them. Or take them out. I'm not so picky either way."

"Spike got you the names?"

Buffy nodded.

"I don't like trusting him," Willow said bluntly, tone as cold as her breath frosting the air. "I know we have to, but when it's Tara's life on the line, all I can say is he better not fuck up."

They reached the edge of the park and paused at the gates, scanning the street that stretched on either side before them. Across the street ran a row of quaint shops, white stucco with red-tiled roofs and flowering window-boxes. Between a bookstore and a café a narrow alley held the entrance to an old sewer-tunnel that would carry them across town to the edge of the campus. A pair of guards could be seen at the end of the block, standing under a lamp, smoking.

"It's three minutes to curfew," Buffy said, checking her watch. "If they see us, they'll want full papers." She stuck her hands in her pockets and sighed. "We'll have to wait until they leave."

Maybe a minute passed as they stood with their hands tucked away, idly turning their heads here and there as if expecting at any moment a parade of circus bears and trick cyclists to wheel by.

Willow's gaze swept like the slow movement of a second hand until it landed on one of the ancient trees that flanked the gate. "How do you suppose they keep all the green things greening?" she
brooded aloud. "All the plants should be dead by now."

"Magic?"

She gave Buffy a dry look. "Magic isn't a panacea."

"A who?"

"A cure-all. Magic can't solve everything. I mean, okay, it could, but it would take massive forces to keep the chlorophyll production going without sun."

She turned the problem around to view all sides, twisting it like a Rubik's cube. But there were too many other questions. "None of it makes sense—I keep trying to figure out how it all works. A consumer-based society is a machine, with a million moving parts. Theirs should have thrown a gear and broken down by now, but Xander says they're selling state cigarettes and chocolate bars—and what about the fruit and vegetables? The markets are still full, and they should have run out weeks ago."

"It's a poser," Buffy admitted, swinging in place a bit like one of those musical flower pots Willow had wanted as a child. Five years ago her body language might have meant good spirits; now it was just an attempt to ward off the chill.

"I suppose they could be transporting goods up from Hell Thirty-Seven or wherever it is they come from, but that portal of theirs has to be a massive energy suck. No way is supply meeting demand. If they don't start importing from the outside world soon, they're going to—"

Two semi-trucks rumbled slowly by, featureless and anonymous except for the Grauth state seal on the side. Behind them trailed a military Jeep filled with Grauth guards, weapons up.

Willow and Buffy exchanged a glance.

"Come on," Buffy said, and dashed off, running parallel to the road behind the stone wall that bordered the park. Willow ran after her, sneakers hitting the turf with damp soft thuds in sync with her breath. They paced the convoy without too much strain but were forced to break at the end of each block until the escort had passed, and then run to catch up.

By the time they reached the Altimera Bridge at the southeastern edge of town, Willow had tapped her reserves and was dogging Buffy's heels blindly, oriented only by the sound of their footfalls. When Buffy came to a stop, Willow collided into her with a lungless squeak.

"Shhhh," Buffy said, grabbing her wrist and pushing her into the shadow of a rhododendron. Willow fell to her knees and wheezed, both hands flattened on the grass.

"S okay," she mumbled. "Just a...cleansing vomit." With a groan, she collapsed vomitless onto the ground and rested her hot cheek there, a few inches behind Buffy's left shoe. Past it she could see the bridge, green and iron and riveted, its gated entrance dramatically shadowed by upturned spotlights on either side.

As she watched and allowed her brain to absorb oxygen, a soldier came from the guard house and approached the truck. From inside the cab a grey hand extended papers, which the guard took and examined closely. Other soldiers lined the gate, motionless with guns in hand until the inspection had been satisfied, and then they stepped aside and lifted the gate arms, allowing the truck to pass through.

"They're headed for the city limits," Buffy said.

Willow pushed herself off the ground with two limp noodles and staggered up to lean against a
tree. "Uh huh."

"And the defense barrier."

"There could just be detention camps out that way. They might be bringing supplies."

"We need to find out for sure. If they've opened the barrier..." Buffy turned and looked at Willow with a zealous fire in her eyes. "I'm thinking it's time for a road trip."

"What's the meeting for?" Kethas asked, staring across the length of the room at where the adults were gathering. Willow's head moved now and then as she studied something spread on the table, just enough to keep the stripes of light dancing on her red hair. He kept an eye on her out of habit. Witches made him uneasy.

"Dunno," Marcos said, sharpening a knife ostentatiously with rough little scratches. Muy macho. "Another crazy mission. Ours not to wonder why; ours just to shut up and die."

"You said it." Dor had a notepad braced under her good arm and was doodling pictures of small blonde girls with knives in their chests, dangling from nooses, getting bayoneted. She looked bitter; worse, she looked bored. You didn't want to let yourself get bored around here in Kethas's experience. They'd make you clean the already spotless guns or patrol the tunnels just to give you something to do.

"You know what we are," Marcos went on. "Red shirts. Cannon fodder, man. We're here to stop the bullets, that's it. No shiny medals, no parade. We're just the cold-meat side dish waiting to be served up. Now, you never gonna see one of them getting kacked. You wait. They got a plan, it'll be us charging the hill. It'll be you, man." He directed his knife point at Kethas. "You lying there, grey-necks rippin' paper dolls outta your guts, and you're screaming, 'Mama, mama, I'm comin' to join you--'"

"Shut up."

The icy words surprised them all to silence, and their heads turned to Jonathan, who'd spoken. Kethas had forgotten the human was even present. Quiet, wide-eyed, and nervous, he lurked in corners like a mouse most of the time, but now he glared them down with contempt.

"You'd all be dead now if it weren't for them. So would I. They've put themselves on the front lines for years and never asked for medals. But they're heroes. So what if we're not? You want to leave? Go out and get dead. You don't need them for that." His mouth flattened as if to crush out every memory of every smile in the universe; he looked almost nauseated by emotion. "You people make me sick."

They watched him get up and walk away, leaving a complicated silence in his wake. Marcos held his knife and sharpening stone in his hands but didn't resume his task, while Dor's pencil worked a dark line back and forth across one square of paper. Both were expressionless, but Kethas thought they seemed shamed. Hard to tell with humans.

"Well, this is a feeble excuse for a rebel alliance."

Kethas turned just in time to see a vampire in Grauth uniform pull Marcos's head back and whip a
knife to rest under his jaw. The blade gleamed against the panicky swallowing of his throat.

It was just Spike, but that wasn't entirely reassuring.

"Aren't you lucky I wasn't the real thing," Spike asked, the mesmerizing thoughtfulness of his voice suggesting he might still be. He considered his victim for a long moment, tapped his knife once against the skin--Marcos made a choking sound--then put it away.

"Never sit with your back to the door," he advised, tone roughening to irritable, and reached inside his coat to withdraw what Kethas, tensing, feared was another weapon, but turned out to be a carton of cigarettes. He dropped them in Marco's lap. "Not getting you any more, so don't smoke them all at once. If her blondeness finds out I'm corrupting your youthful pink lungs, I'll be a yard shorter."

"Thanks," Marcos said weakly.

Turning his head the vampire inspected Dor's drawings. "Tongue usually sticks out when you're hanged," he noted before crossing the room to the meeting.

The three of them looked at each other, then scraped their chairs around to face the door.

"I saw that," Xander said.

Spike weighed the idea of deliberately misunderstanding, achieved preemptive boredom. "Just teaching them a few life lessons."

Xander gave this a moment's even consideration, then said, "Good," and began to turn away.

"Oi," Spike piped, annoyance rising, "Stop acting out of character. Bad enough watching you go all Jean-Paul Marat on the grauts--you start being understanding, that's taking it too bloody far." His display of disgust was only half put on. "If I start to like you, I'm going to have you killed." Unable to get a rise out of the other man, he pretended to have an idea. "Here, look, why not take a shot for old time's sake." He tilted his face, offered a choice of nose or jaw.

"Tempting," Xander admitted. "But ultimately homoerotic and disturbing, and no."

And then Little Red Witchyhood spotted them. "Oh hey, Spike's here--we can start." Gathering everyone to the table, she reoriented a map of Sunnydale so that they could see it. Spike wasn't looking though, because Buffy was watching him across the width of the table, her mysterious girly eyes speaking things to him he couldn't quite hear. He wondered if she was still upset about the trifles he'd salvaged for her, and it made his neck stiff, made him unsure what to do with his hands.

Plotting the overthrow of a demon government had its kicks, but if he could leave Sunnydale with Buffy that minute, he would. Abandon the town and everyone in it. She'd only to say the word. To hell with the rest of them and to pratting around in this Nazi fetish gear.

Frustration made his heart ache and bite itself. Terrible thing.

"You brought intel?" Willow asked.

He turned his dryest look on her. "Yeah, right," he drawled. "Intel." Taking off his cap, he was
aware of all eyes pinned to him; he removed a folded sheet of paper and passed it over. "List of
departure times for the supply carriers."

She compared it against the figures jotted in her notebook. "These match up with what we've
observed, so it looks like they're running on schedule." Apparently for his sake, she added, "We've
been timing deliveries through the south gate for the last few days--we think it's the only route in
or out of the barrier."

"It is," he said.

Buffy studied him, face smooth but eyes troubled, as if she wanted to suspect him of betrayals and
other bad things. She was always ready to slam the door on tender feelings, and wasn't as sharp at
hiding them as she thought.

"Before, you didn't know anything about the deliveries," she said. "Now you're Mister Knowledge
Person?"

He cast a lowering, half-embarrassed frown at her. "Told you, they kept me in the dark. This is
need-to-know, top brass only. I poured two bottles of bloody expensive vodka into my source and
still had to squeeze him like a sponge 'fore he'd confirm anything."

Buffy nodded, a grudging allowance. "Did you learn anything else?"

"Yeah." He gusted the word on a sigh. "The barrier's set up with detectors, warns them if humans
pass through--out, not in. But since it's out we want...puts kind of a crimp in plans."

After a pause in which Buffy seemed thrown by the news, she raised her head and rallied. "Not
necessarily."

It took a moment before he connected her words to the way she looked at him. "Now, hold on. You
need me here. Important man on the inside, remember?"

"Not that important," Xander put in blandly.

"Send that kid, the Bracken." Spike gestured across the room. "It'd be good for him. Let him play
the hero instead of sitting 'round here with one thumb up his arse and the other twiddling a trigger.
You know, not much longer and one of those silly tots'll shoot off a foot."

Buffy stepped closer to the table, resting her hands on the edge; under the glare of the hanging
lamp they turned almost white. "He's too young," she said, voice low enough not to carry. "And
he's not someone I can rely on. He doesn't know Angel or L.A." She held his eyes. "Do you think I
wouldn't rather go myself, or maybe send Dawn and give her a chance to get the hell out of here?"

From her perch on a crate Dawn brewed a mutinous stormcloud, but compressed her lips and
remained silent.

"I know you're important," Buffy went on. "Which is why you'll need to pull this off and get back
before anyone figures out you're missing." She turned to Willow. "What window of time will he
have?"

And that was that, Spike thought, swallowing down any further argument and his own prideful
nature. She commanded, he obeyed. He was always knight to some dark queen and he'd never tried
to be more, except where reputation was concerned. God, he loved her; so much that he could
barely pay heed to what the little witch was saying, but he made himself, to carry out his slayer's
orders.

"There's an outbound transport every evening at five p.m., when the trucks should be empty. They return again around five in the morning with goods for the market. That's probably the best one to catch--the trucks for that run are large and the trip time suggests they're going to L.A. All the other transports are smaller, probably local pick-ups of milk or produce."

Willow began tracing a route on the map. "They leave the depot here," a finger tap, "and cross town to the south gate--Fernley to Minot to Buena Vista, then straight down to the bridge. There are three checkpoints along the way and another one at the gate. When they come back they take the same route to the depot and unload." She looked up from the map, cute face all a-crinkle. "It's the checkpoints we have to worry about. They do random searches."

"The best insertion point would be the gate," Xander said, eyes fixed absently on the map as if seeing through it to visualize what it represented. "But it's also the most well-lit, with no area for concealment. The depot's a converted Wal-Mart, fenced and patrolled, and they turn the trucks inside out before they go. Of the checkpoints, the last is our only real choice for play."

Spike, who remembered Xander the Younger back when he was just an oaf in geek's clothing and redolent of extra-crispy double cheese, opened his mouth to fire off a round of mockery at this military pretentiousness, caught Buffy's eye, rolled his tongue into his cheek, and bit down. She owed him.

"It has cover," Buffy interjected hastily. "They've built guardhouses under a railroad crossing, and there's plenty of trees and bushes--if we set up a distraction, you should be able to get on there."

He was putting his bollocks on the chopping block for them yet again, his fate in the hands of humans, no more than children. The git, the witch, and the woman who'd played merry hell with his heart. And for what? To fetch Angel, the brooding great bastard, who'd galumph in on a white horse wearing his mawkish soul on his sleeve and snatch Buffy away first chance he got. It was idiotic, it was laughable, it was pathetic.

"Right," he said simply.

"Here's a sketch of the checkpoint," Willow said, laying another piece of paper on top of the map. "Traffic goes both ways, south and north, and there are guards at both ends and along the overpass. Timing's critical. If we want to draw the guards' focus away from the trucks at the south gate, we'll have to be coming through the north gate while they're waiting for clearance. If we don't get it right the first time, we'll have to keep trying--we can't know if the plan's a go until we're through the gate and can see whether the trucks are in the southbound lane."

A contemplative silence fell and Spike raised his brows, curious to see who would be the first to point out just how buggering mental a plan it was.

"Okay," Buffy said, taking a deep breath. "I think we've got a chance of pulling this off, but if we don't--" A sidelong glance.

Willow pulled the map back. "I'll start figuring our escape routes, just in case."

She was joined by Xander, Dawn leaning forward with interest. Buffy came around the table to him, away from the others, and he stepped readily off to the side with her. He was always keen to soak up any personal, undivided attention she might bestow. Near to her he smelled perfume, some floral misty stuff that he remembered her wearing from months or years back. It must have been in the box, he realized; he'd brought it to her unknowing, and he felt a fool for not having done
sooner.

He reached out to touch her cheek and she turned her face away, glancing at her friends.

It was worse than a blow when she did him over like that. His arm lowered by itself, slow, heavy, cold, and dead. Which he was, head to toe, except for that spark of hot anger she nourished in him. Hard, changeable bitch goddess, fickle slayer, twisting him all around with her flowery smelling skin and her--

"--are you listening to me?" she broke off to ask.

"Bring Angel," he repeated, jaw tightening as he worked the name around in his mouth. The words came out mild, but his bones felt like they'd achieved the tensile strength of steel.

"And Giles. We need the council's help on this." He nodded and she gazed up at him, grave and searching. "Spike..."

And here it came, whatever it was, some warning she felt bound to issue, or maybe a winsome, gently-worded plea that would exact promises from him, duties he'd be forced to carry out with gritted teeth. Maybe she wanted him to tote a love note to Angel Daddy.

And then she kissed him. Not a peck, not a token, but her soft palm pulling his neck down, her mouth open like an oven to engulf the dead. When she slid her other arm around the small of his back under his coat, he groaned, and when she let him go he was on fire. He wanted to fuck her, he wanted to leave that minute on his quest, he was torn and oblivious to anyone else in the room.

"I didn't thank you," she said. "For bringing those things from home."

He touched his tongue to the inside of his lips, tasting her kiss. "More thanks than that?" he asked, and what should have hit a lewd note came out starry-eyed and hopeful.

"It means a lot to Dawn...and to me." She was avoiding his question, however gracefully, and she'd moved back a step. But she hadn't let go of him yet, and he couldn't let go either. "You've come a long way without a soul," she said, her words quiet and only for him. "Don't let Angel bait you. To him, you're everything he used to be. He won't see who you've become. He won't understand."

Her favor puffed him up even as it constricted his chest almost too much to bear; he felt giddy, drunk, light-headed as William as his life-blood drained away. "I'll be a good boy," he said, smiling, offering his earnestness as a gift.

Her loving mouth might have been a trick, but without a cause he was no rebel. Without her, he was nothing at all.

A quarter mile past the spot where Buena Vista narrowed to one lane, a railroad embankment spanned the road, creating a rocky tunnel. On each side of the road leading up to it, untouched tracts of pine acted as windbreaks and baffling walls, protecting the businesses behind them. To the east, a clump of almost featureless office buildings sat embedded like Legos in shorn campus grounds, visible only as rows of evenly spaced windows in the dark. Westward, terraced offices could be glimpsed through the scrub.
Under the embankment, gated guardhouses were placed to monitor traffic both ways, foot and vehicle; above them, soldiers patrolled along both sides of the railway tracks, using the walkway as a lookout for anything coming down the road.

Lance Corporal Villek was on southbound watch, in theory the more important duty since it led toward the edge of town and the barrier, but in practice just as boring as northbound. No one had ever tried to escape, at least not yet. At first he'd held out hope. He'd seen a hundred films during training to prepare him for war, and on his arrival to the surface he'd believed that the dream and glory had finally come true. But the only humans he met were little more than cattle to be herded through his checkpoint. None looked like Ingmar Bergman or acted like Humphry Bogart, and everyone he challenged had their papers ready.

It was whispered that in some areas of Sunnydale rebel forces fought back, sabotaging the noble Grauth Reich. Villek wished he were there, in the thick of it. Guard duty degraded his soul. Also, he was getting corns.

Snow began eddying down on the wind and thickened to a heavy patter in the space of a blink. Villek, pleased by one more thing to complain about, was savoring his cud of discontent when Ganyar tramped over, boot soles squeaking on the snow, to share a cigarette. Together they watched a queue of humans shuffle one by one up the pedestrian walk and past the guardhouse, some carrying grocery bags for their masters or baskets on their arms, all with signa displayed prominently on their coats.

"Didn't think it'd be so cold," Villek said. "In training they said the sun baked the surface, so hot it'd be cooling for a thousand years. Sun every day, we were supposed to have. 'You'll be able to set your clock by it,' they said." He masticated his cigarette, puffing morosely.

"Give it a rest, why don't you," Ganyar said. "They tell you anything when you're green. It's just to make you fight." He looked around for an officer's presence and lowered his voice. "I hear it will be years before they open the barrier, maybe as long as five."

"Who says?"

"Those that'd know."

Ganyar liked to boast that he had a cousin who had a friend who had an uncle in the High Command. Unable to answer this, Villek snorted.

"Besides--doesn't matter when the day comes. Holy fire's not for the likes of us. We'll be long gone by then, wearing out our boot soles on the great stones of home."

"What?" The prospect alarmed Villek, mostly because it had never occurred to him before. "But they'll need guards here--they'll always need guards."

"Maybe not," Ganyar said mysteriously. "Or maybe just not us. Why do you think they're--" He broke off talking just as Villek broke off listening, and both brought their guns up at the same time, still pointing at the ground but closer to firing level as they turned toward the ruckus at the northbound exit.

"Filthy whore!" someone yelled.

Villek perked up.
Earlier in the day they'd slipped out through the checkpoint, just two more unremarked humans within the stream of people leaving the city core on whatever business their Grauth masters set. Now in the five o’clock evening hour they were re-entering when most people were headed in the opposite direction, but there was enough foot traffic through the northbound gate to buffer their presence.

Willow linked her arm through Xander's as the line worked its way forward, and he spared a moment to smile down at her. Neither spoke. Alongside them, thin but effective wire fencing enclosed travelers in a security corridor, while several yards ahead the orange-and-white gate arms barred any attempt to exit without official inspection. When a person reached checkpoint, the first arm lifted to allow them entry, then closed, boxing them into a holding pen for review. Posted inside the box, a Grauth in uniform was meticulously examining papers, the business watched over by guards with guns readied. After being cleared, travelers were allowed to move forward through the tunnel to the other side.

The plan they'd come up with was a simple one, but Willow found it difficult to concentrate on anything for more than a moment. In front of her, a girl in a red coat holding her mother's hand kept turning to scrutinize her. When Willow waggled her fingers, the girl swiveled her head away quickly, laying her curls against the side of her mother's coat to hide her face. A few seconds later she peeped again, her eyes bright.

In the line behind them, a couple was trading whispers about food shortages and other gossip they'd picked up from the Grauth family they served. Ahead, the line shortened by increments of one or two people at a time. Each step closer deepened the sickening feeling in Willow's stomach and made her clutch at Xander more tightly. Over the last several years she'd been a thousand and one flavors of afraid; afraid of the future, afraid of death, afraid of what might happen to Tara and her friends. But rising fast on her least-favorite list was the helpless terror of having to pull off feats of derring-do without any magic. It reminded her of all those years in school when she was just a powerless little bookworm, writhing under the big stompy feet of every jock and cheerleader who took the unwelcome time to notice her. Take away her witchhood, and what was left? Red hair and cunning. Big deal.

"Our papers are still good, right?" she breathed to Xander.

The question was a nervous tic; she knew the answer, but he gave it to her anyway, leaning in as if to kiss her hair. "Another forty-eight hours," he murmured.

She jittered restlessly and they moved another foot forward. The only people in front of them now were the woman and her child, two pretty girls in long coats, and the man stepping into the security enclosure. The slow pace made her anxious--it would be pure luck if they'd managed to synchronize their passage through the checkpoint with the delivery trucks on the first go, but she was crossing her fingers because she didn't want to do this twice.

Eyes drawn back to the little girl, who was peering yet again over her shoulder, Willow smiled weakly. This was apparently enough to earn herself a show, and the girl raised her mother's hand as high as she could over her head to pirouette and then pose, slim as a needle under a phonograph arm.

"Candace," her mother hissed, distracted and yanking her daughter's arm. "Behave!"

Willow registered the fear in her tone at nearly the same moment the voices ahead began to rise.
"You have my papers," the man at the gate was saying with distress. "I am a skilled worker, specialist class--I'm an engineer. I help maintain off-grid electrical systems. All my permits are there--my exemption stamps are up to date."

In response, the guard held the passport bundle open, reviewing its contents for long, ticking seconds before he looked up with narrowed eyes. "Step out of line," he said, gesturing for one of the guards to release the latch on a side-gate into the fenced yard. Inside were more soldiers and a small shed that might have once been used for gardening, now hung with a sign in Grauth and English that designated it an Inquiry Station.

"Look, what's not there? Is something missing? I went to the registration bureau like they told me just last week."

Xander and Willow exchanged a tense look.

"Step out of line," repeated the guard impatiently.

The man gazed at his papers in the guard's hand and then up to his face as if trying to find some echo of humanity there. "I was supposed to travel with my supervisor, Lieutenant Grillyan--he's Grauth--but he was delayed. He told me to go ahead."

His head turned to gaze back down the line of people waiting as if expecting to see someone appear in his support. When his eyes passed across Willow's her heart seized up and she felt Xander's grip tighten, clamping her to immobility against his side. He had no gun today and she had no magic.

The man looked back to the guard and began to say, "He will be along soo--" as the guard swept the pistol up to his chest and shot him. Willow opened her mouth to cry out and ended up half-choking into the palm of Xander's hand. She struggled by instinct to free herself, staring widely as the man in the security box staggered back and was shot again, and a third time, each smart bang a blow to her ears. The man turned and collapsed against the wire fence facing the trees beyond it, fingers caught in the mesh. The Grauth guard uttered one sharp word in his own language, a command obeyed by the soldiers who stepped forward to collect the body.

"Don't," Xander said, taking his hand away from her mouth. "Don't."

She barely heard him.

The shots ripped all breath from Buffy's lungs and she drew her gun up, prepared to take out every Grauth within range. From her position on the slope the corridor below her was as well lit as a supermarket aisle, and she could see her friends trapped there, stiff and twined together as they watched the man get shot. She saw Willow struggle, Xander's head move closer to her as he spoke. They remained as motionless as the rest as the soldiers wrested the man's body from the fence and dragged it to the verge. It was left there heaped on the snowy ground.

After a few minutes the line lurched forward again, and a pair of young women entered the holding area. She could hear them weeping even from a distance, but they were passed through without challenge, along with a mother and her child. She lifted her rifle as Xander and Willow reached checkpoint, her view of the scene jumping in magnification as she put one eye to the scope. Willow's face, white and stricken, appeared up close. Her lips hung parted on visible breaths but she wasn't speaking, and her movements were clumsily robotic as she handed over her papers.
Xander's shoulders were hunched as if to make him as small as possible.

The examination of their papers seemed to last forever. "Come on," Buffy said, sick with fear. "Come on." She adjusted her rifle to bring the guard's head between the crosshairs, her finger tightening on the trigger then releasing it again abruptly as the guard handed their papers back and waved them through.

There was nothing else for her to do now. She had no way to signal Spike or the others about what had happened. Their plan would have to be aborted for tonight, and it would take her several hours to wend her way through the sector, avoiding patrols until she could enter the tunnels and return to the Initiative. At least they'd made it through this one without losing a life.

Willow leaned into Xander's body as they walked through the underpass, knees weak. In the vehicle lane to their left, a shiny dark car rolled by, officer's permit on the windshield, state flag attached to the hood. Inside, a Grauth woman in fur and jewels laughed at some joke they couldn't hear before passing out of sight. The car's tail-lights blinked a few times and then it accelerated away.

Ahead lay nothing but the clear road, demarcated by a line of snow where the cover ended. A guard house blocked the view of the southbound road at first, but Willow kept her eyes fixed to it and gradually the edge of the building receded, revealing a stretched line of cars headed in the opposite direction, idling, headlights half obscured by snow, pipes gusting exhaust into the cold air. And she could see the trucks, far enough back in line that they hugged the slope where the trees were thickest.

She glanced up at Xander, who read her question and shook his head minutely.

Relief claimed her like vertigo. Being freed from her mission felt like being pardoned at the last minute from some dreaded stage performance and gave her a measure of clarity. But rage came rushing back in to fill the gap, and she saw the man again falling against the fence, blood pouring on the ground. It jerked through her, a memory loop she couldn't switch off. She glared stony-faced at a soldier they passed, and felt Xander jerk her arm under the pretense of drawing her closer.

"Cut it out," she said coldly.

Xander stiffened and dragged his feet suddenly, but they were almost out of the overpass, into the brilliant white freedom of the road. No corridors here, no dividers, only the sidewalk and the street.

"Willow--"

They breached the tunnel and came out into the open air. "Shut up," she said, voice rising with a quaver. She yanked her arm from his and left him to follow. "My god, a man was shot, a man, a man died back there," she turned and gesticulated in what felt like real hysteria, backing further into the empty road, "and it's nothing to you!"

She saw fear in Xander's face as he swallowed, dark gaze holding her own, and then he shook his head and said in an uneven voice, "You're a goddamn stupid bitch." The words lacked force but hung between them for a horrible moment while she breathed heavily and he swallowed again, until he worked himself up to say more loudly, "Stupid bitch." What might have been real anger
sparked behind his eyes. He stalked forward, and she stumbled back along the road, trying not to slip on the wet snow.

"I'm not the stupid one," she yelled. "You--you're crazy, you're paranoid, all the time, no matter what I do, all you can think is, is, what if someone's looking at me, what if some man wants me, what if he takes me away! Waa waa waa, you're like a twenty-three year old baby--you can't keep a woman, and it's always someone else's fault!"

In her face now, Xander grabbed her coat lapels and shoved her into the snow. She skidded onto her ass, gasped with the shock of it, and had to push herself up again with cold hands. She couldn't remember if they'd planned that or if he was off script.

"Filthy whore!" he shouted, making her flinch. And she knew this part, her fingers fumbling at her coat buttons, she knew this and it was too late to stop.

"I'm a whore?" she yelled defiantly, desperately wrenching at her resistant coat. She should be taking a look to see if the guards on the overpass were watching, but her cheeks were hot and if she looked anywhere but at Xander she might lose her nerve. "I'm a whore?"

"You're like a sick dog in heat--tail wagging for it, teeth in every man you smell. Making a show of yourself. You might as well just take it all off!"

The tears in her eyes half blinded her, but Willow managed to rip off the maddening weight of her coat. "Fine!" she cried. "You want it? I will!" She thought she heard laughter and whistles in the background but her ears felt roasted with shame and a weird, perilous excitement. "Is that what you want?" She popped the buttons on her blouse, felt it tangle ridiculously around her arms and almost panicked before it fell to the ground. "Is that how you want it? You want me like this?" Her skirt dropped next and clung to one heel like a bad joke until, hopping to one side, she finally kicked it loose. Chilled and shuddering, she struck a defiant pose in the grossly inadequate lingerie she'd borrowed from Buffy.

Clapping from the overpass rained down and whistles were definitely audible now. Xander, who seemed to have lost his voice for a minute, regained it. "Get your clothes on," he ordered, looking dazed and sounding more like real, good-friend Xander, instead of the fake scary one, then shifted back into role to add harshly: "You're embarrassing me!"

A pair of guards ambled up, guns glossy and prominent in front of them, and eyed the scene with interested faces.

One turned to Xander. "Now, now," he clucked, "is that any way to treat a lady?"

When he heard the shouting start, Spike slid out of the bushes and crouched alongside the wire fence. Half-dead ivy scrawled its surface, sheltering him from view. The nearest truck was close enough to spit on, its cab just a few yards ahead; he could see the profile of a man in the passenger seat until the man turned, looking toward the location of the dustup. Spike waited until the guards on the overpass drifted away to get a better view, then slid through a gap in the fence he'd made and rolled under the truck. He had to shimmy and wedge himself across a set of beams bracing the undercarriage, and could already tell that jeans, jumper, and jacket would be useless against the cold.
As he settled into place, oil dripped onto his nose. He closed his eyes, face set in lines of disgust and resignation.

"This had better be bloody well worth it," he said to himself.

Dawn brought a mug of tea to Willow where she sat buried in shawls and blankets. "No more coffee," she apologized. "But we still have enough tea-bags to build a fort. A small one. A fort for mice."

Willow slipped one hand through the blanket fold and took the mug. "Thanks."

Taking a seat on the edge of a crate, Dawn picked up Willow's other hand and rubbed it. It felt cool and soft and bony like her mother's had when she'd gotten sick.

"So, Spike--he made it out?"

"We think so. He didn't meet up at the rendezvous point."

"My plan worked, huh." Dawn didn't feel especially proud of that. Actually, she wished she could take back her lunatic idea. It was obvious how bad it must have been; though Willow was trying hard to shrug it off as easy-peasy, she looked like she did after a bad bout of magic--pale and limp and nauseated.

Xander came over and sat down, and after a moment when no one said anything Dawn found a reason to excuse herself. "Hey, look," she said, "I have no tea. I'm tealess. I'll just...tea off."

He stared at the floor as Dawn left, his head cocked, listening to her scuffing footsteps until they blended with other noises across the room. "What the hell were you thinking?" he asked, calmer than he felt.

"That's a dumb question," Willow said with the same false calm. He knew her face too well to miss the strain in it. "But I was going to ask you the same thing. Why did you push me? They could have shot you, Xander, and not thought twice about it--they shot a man for nothing, for not having a piece of paper or for just being there at the wrong time--and you pushed me!" Her voice had risen at last, outrage covering for a fear he shared. He pictured the bullets striking her chest, sending her to the ground like a puppet with cut strings.

"You started it," he pointed out, but his throat was rough and the humor fell flat.

"We might not have had a second chance."

They pondered events for a few seconds. Willow took a sip of tea; Xander dug some dirt out from under a nail and noticed tremors in his hands. Adrenaline was wearing off and the day felt as long as it had been dark. Tiredness washing over him, Xander realized aloud: "That was an incredibly stupid plan."

"Yeah...don't say that around Dawn."

"We need to mark this on the calendar so that next year on the anniversary of this stupid plan we can not do it again. Also, I'm getting a tattoo." He flexed one hand, touched the back of it, trying to
make the tremor go away. "Right here. It'll just say, 'Hell, no.' I'll know what it means."

"And then when people push, you can say, 'Talk to the hand.'"

She did a bad Senor Wences imitation with one fist and gave him a wan smile, and it hurt too much, the death she hadn't died, the unspoken things between them, the past eight rotten years, the everything. He half tumbled off his chair—a scrape and a clatter—and fell to his knees in front of her, letting his head come to rest in her lap.

"Xander!" she gasped urgently, just as if he'd been shot.

Her mug rolled somewhere and covered him in honeyed tea and she stroked his hair for a long time, telling stories from their childhood as if she were sewing them back in.

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The road rushing by under Spike's backside would have kept him awake even if he'd wanted to rest. He'd hitched a lot of creative and usually illegal rides in his life. His first choice of travel had once been a nice sleeper car, and then a car became something you could drive yourself and he never went back, embracing speed and independence over comfort, except when Dru got fed up and tore into a screaming tirade. Dru liked a nice cozy choo-choo. But cargo bays, wagons, livestock vans, tramp steamers, refrigeration cars, oxcart, and once in the keel of a zeppelin—he'd circled the world by whatever means expedient, usually when alone and whenever a proper ride was too risky.

Frankly, it always sucked. Tonight his driver seemed to be popping bennies, the trucker's friend, and Spike noticed that sometimes the road below picked up a white, wavering ribbon for a mile or two as they veered lazily across the lane divider.

"Slow down, you bastard!" he yelled, his words caught and flung away in the current of air. And then another drip of oil smacked into his face and he seethed.

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Buffy walked down the hallway between the old demon containment cells. The kids had been setting up house inside, dragging in abandoned office furniture and boxes to outfit them. The cells were large, but in each one the furnishings had been squashed back into the corners like cramped little mouse nests, as if all that white space was too much to think about. She stopped at Dawn's cell, where Dawn was sleeping, a lamp on by her bedside. Stepping in around piles of clothes, she looked at the wall behind the camp mattress, now decorated with the dribs and drabs from home that Spike had brought. A picture of mom; of dad; one of Dawn and herself, heads together, grinning.

If her mom was here, what would she do? Make hot soup, mend blankets, hold Dawn's hand, soothe her fears...fight like a fury if she needed to. Buffy could do that, but she didn't want to forget the rest. She didn't want to be just General-in-Chief Summers, working the troops until they dropped.

Crouching a moment, she took a fluffy pen from Dawn's lax hand and then, with greater care,
dislodged her diary. She set it closed on the floor by the mattress and pulled the thin blanket up around her sister's shoulders. The blankets were getting dirty; she didn't even know where the dirt came from. It was a thought her mom might have had.

Back in the hallway she passed Kethas's room; he was sitting up on his mattress, back to the wall, headphones on, reading the same comic he'd been reading for two months. He didn't look up.

At the edge of Dor's and Marcos's room she halted and stepped back. She'd intended to apologize again to Dor for breaking her arm, try to find some friendly words that wouldn't antagonize her. Something to keep her spirits up. But Dor already had something for that, someone; she lay on her good side, arm crooked close to her ribs, while Marcos kissed her, and the movement of their bodies under the blanket hinted at more than Buffy wanted to see.

She turned away and leaned against the wall with her own arms folded around her, letting the antiseptic whiteness of the corridor leach warmth from her body. Glancing down, she moved her left hand slightly to uncover the claddagh ring she'd put on. She couldn't have said why she had. Just because it still fit--that didn't meant anything. She wore her heart pointed inward, and that was exactly how it felt.

She moved the ring to her other hand, heart out.

Spike had wanted very dearly to kill the delivery truck driver, but as it would have also killed his chances of getting a ride back, he controlled himself, shook loose the seven pounds of road grit embedded in his arse, and cleaned off the minstrel mask of oil that had covered his face during the trip--as he imagined it, anyway, since when he tried to look at himself in the cracked and age-spotted mirror in the warehouse bathroom, he discovered his face had got lost.

"Oh, right," he said. No private vanity mirror for him here. He stared into the blank glass trying to fix his hair for far longer than was sensible, imagining he could see something if he worked hard enough, before giving up and snaking through the back of the warehouse. At the rear bay doors he halted in the shadows, fascinated by the line of late evening sun across the floor. Seven o'clock at night, give or take a tick, and the bloody thing was still hanging up there, beaming goodwill down on all humanity and death rays on all vampires. Getting to the Hyperion would mean going underground.

Funny. For the first time ever, he was missing Sunnydale.

"Do you take cream?" Angel asked, turning to his visitor and holding up the creamer.

Rupert Giles looked up distractedly from the journal he was holding. "Er, no."

"Sugar?"

"No. Just plain, please." He lowered his head again slightly but his eyes remained fixed on the vampire, narrowing over his glasses as he watched him prepare the tea. Giles was still adjusting to
the whole vampire-with-a-soul revelation, and the picture of the undead handling sugar cubes with silver tongs was disorienting. Also, he wasn't entirely comfortable with the proximity of the creature to a beverage he intended to drink--although he supposed he should trust Wyndam-Pryce not to let a guest be poisoned.

"You've kept meticulous records," Giles said as Angel joined him, glancing up as the other man slid a mug across the table to him, steam wafting the familiar scent of Earl Grey.

"Wesley," Angel said. "He keeps the books."

"Of course." Giles rested his hand on the open pages. "I haven't been able to find any reference to a 'Buffy Summers,' or for that matter to any of the other names in the letter I received."

"But you think she's a slayer."

Giles hadn't decided yet if he found Angel's direct gaze unnerving or encouraging. He nodded once, angling his head to evade that focus while he gave the idea more thought. He was hesitant to commit himself fully to belief yet. "The letter does make that claim."

"I thought the council kept records of its own."

Affront and defensiveness stirred in Giles even though the remark had been neutral in tone. It was a sore point for an archivist.

"We do. There is a suggestive gap in the chronicles between the accounts of Faith and the previous slayer in line. However, these things do sometimes occur. Not all slayers have been identified first as potentials. If one is called from outside our auspices, she might survive for a time...and die before we can locate her."

"Sounds like this one's still alive."

"Which makes no sense," Giles pointed out, frowning. "As Faith would not have been called unless a previous slayer died." He allowed a measured pause. "You said that Faith--"

"I told you. No questions about her."

"Right," Giles murmured.

Angel sat silently for a few moments, shoulders hunched as he considered the untouched tea on the table, boxed in between his restless hands. Then he seemed to come to a decision, raising his eyes to Giles. "I've been having dreams lately. There's a girl, blonde. We fight and...do other things. I don't know her name, but I feel like I know her."

"I've been having dreams as well," Giles said slowly. More astounded than he wanted to admit, he tried to piece together what it might mean. "This puts a new light on matters."

"Magic," Angel said in his laconic way. "Maybe a memory spell."

Cordelia appeared in the kitchen door, drawing both men's eyes. "You might want to come out here."

They trailed her to the lobby where Wyndam-Pryce and his friend Gunn were keeping an angry man at bay with raised cross-bows. Their captive was blond, unremarkably dressed, and not especially formidable. But then most vampires appeared innocuous on first glance.
The ex-watcher turned his head a notch at their arrival but didn't lower his weapon. "We were just arriving when what should we find on our doorstep," he said, his voice dry and melodious. "A vampire gift basket."

Giles felt pleased to have his suspicion confirmed; he hadn't come across many vampires since giving up field work and accepting a research position with the council--as apparently he'd done at some point, without really remembering how, when, or why. He took the opportunity to consider this new example of the species with interest, from a safe distance.

His identity revealed, the vampire gave Wyndam-Pryce a look of dislike so eloquent that Giles wondered if there was history between them. Then again, demons weren't an affable sort, generally speaking.

"Spike," Angel said.

"Spike," Cordelia affirmed to the room at large.

The demon tipped his head and smiled.

The End

Chapter End Notes

So, it's been a while. Many apologies for the long delay. It was extremely depressing, and I can't believe it lasted most of a year. Moving on before I start thinking about it further.

There's not much to say about this one except that everyone in the story cried more than they were supposed to. Plus I think I ended up spending more time wandering down slightly self-indulgent sidepaths than focusing on major plot points I wanted to develop, which resulted in some imbalances. But I still have...nine more stories...to go....

Moving on now.

Feedback always welcome for those of you generous enough to write to someone who doesn't write back. Except for the stories.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
"Spike," Angel said.

"Spike," Cordelia affirmed to the room at large.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Angel sounded as if he’d just stepped in something foul that he had no hope of getting off his shoe.

"Yeah, well that's kind of a long story--how about calling off Abbot and Costello here so I'm not perforated during the prologue?"

"I don't think so."

"Christ," Spike said, then spotted Giles standing off to the side. "Look, Giles, tell them I'm not dangerous. I mean, I am dangerous," he caught himself, "except to your sort." He raised his brows expectantly, then said, "Humans!" with exasperated force in the face of Giles's incomprehension.

"Why should I tell them any such thing?" Giles wondered, marveling at the audacity of the request. "And how do you know my name?"

"Ohhhh." Spike adjusted his posture and inspected his audience with a fresh and knowing eye. "I get it. Memory spell. Clever grauts."

Angel and Giles exchanged a look. "What did you do?" Angel asked Spike, voice heavy with accusation and threat.

"Isn't my doing." Spike's brows drew together, wings of umbrage. "And why're you so ready to blame me?"

Cordelia met outrage with outrage, huffing a humorless, disbelieving laugh. "Maybe that's because the last time we saw you, you were trailing loan sharks, chum, and nearly got our hotel burned down. And let's not forget the spot of friendly torture you inflicted on Angel before that, looking for your Ring of Marinara."

"Gem of Amarra," Spike said, each word uttered from the throat like a growl.

"Whatever."

"You never bring anything but trouble, Spike." Motionless, Angel nonetheless looked ready to
pounce. "Tell me why we shouldn't just kill you right now."

Spike narrowed his eyes. "Well, that wouldn't help Buffy much, would it?"

Cordelia frowned at Wes, who frowned at Angel, who showed no expression whatsoever. "Who's the hell's Buffy?" Cordelia asked.

Spike stared at her and as the moment stretched Giles felt the world around him fading out at the edges, a kind of existential blankness tugging at his moorings, as if what he understood and knew of the world was just a story made up by interfering powers.

Then the moment snapped back into place and Spike said, "Buffy Summers? Little blonde dervish, dresses like Britney Spears, kicks like Jackie Chan? The slayer?"

Cordelia shrugged. "Never heard of her."

"You went to high school with her."

"I went to high school with a lot of forgettable people," she said, brows arching, her casual hauteur conveying everything one needed to know about her previous social standing.

"How do you know a slayer, Spike?" Angel challenged suspiciously. "Not your usual company of choice. Unless you're looking to put another notch on your belt."

"Oh come on. Don't tell me you've forgotten." The vampire layered incredulity over sarcasm. "Must be the mother of all memory spells to crack a nut that thick."

"We gonna stand here all night listening to this jabber?" Gunn broke in to ask of the room at large. "I don't know about y'all, but I don't mind forgetting what I can't remember, and I sure as hell don't care if I forget him." He glared at Spike, then looked to Angel. "Let's just dust him, go out for pizza."

"Ooh," Cordelia said, brightening. "Canadian bacon and pepperoni!"

Spike made a sound of expressive disgust. "You know, I hung under a truck to get here, not to mention wandered the L.A. sewers for three long and incredibly foul hours--do you have any idea what's down there?" He posture was stiff as a disdainful cat's, and he glared down his nose at them. "I didn't even want to come. You don't want to help, fine. But I'm afraid I can't die today. Sorry."

Angel twitched threateningly and Wyndam-Pryce raised his own cross-bow higher; swinging it almost imperceptibly from side to side as he tried to keep a bead on Spike.

"Let him go," Angel said in a conversational tone, "and I'll make it quick. You hurt him, I let Wes kill you. Now that could take weeks."

"Oh, I'm not going to hurt him." Spike's tone said the prospect was droll. "See? Not even a wince. I'm just going to keep his manliness between us--make sure you don't ejaculate any of those naughty stakes my way. Course, you could try walking over here, take him off my hands. But maybe I go for Wonder Woman there next. Got a bit of demon in her, as I recall." He eyed Cordelia familiarly, half smiling.

"Creep," she said.
Briefly distracted, Giles looked at her and wondered what species of demon.

"Not weeks," Wyndam-Pryce said. "Months. That's how long I'll take killing you, Spike."

Spike mouthed a small kiss at him.

"I really don't think it would be wise to kill him at all," Giles said, taking the opportunity to wedge a foot in the proceedings. All eyes turned to him. Unsettled by the spotlight, he noted with care, "Everything he's said corresponds with the details of the letter I received."

"I'm sure it does," Wyndam-Pryce said, a curl of contempt in his tone that Giles could only hope was directed at the vampire. "He's probably engineered the entire thing--yet another of his schemes to entrap Angel or use our resources for his own purposes."

"Oh for...the love of Pete!" Spike shifted with tectonic frustration; Gunn, forced to shift with him, gritted his teeth.

"Wes," Angel said with a subtle change of stance. "Stand down."

"Angel--"

"Spike wants to talk. Let's talk."

Giles was fascinated by how Angel's focus seemed to distribute itself evenly between Wes, Gunn, and Spike, as if he were attuned to the next potential move of each man and ready to spring. If he did, Giles had no doubt he'd be a match for Spike's swiftness and strength. That didn't negate the risk to the others if it should come to a fight. But when Wyndam-Pryce lowered his weapon, Spike lowered his own and released Gunn without fanfare. Gunn whirled with anger immediately and looked interested in going mano-a-mano.

"There's only one dude I let get up close and personal and it ain't you. Try that again and see what happens."

Spike smirked.

Giles cleared his throat. "Very good," he said, interrupting and hoping to redirect discussion to more important matters. "Perhaps it's time to take this parley elsewhere." He met the eyes of the obviously unsouled vampire and hesitated over etiquette and absurdity. "We were just having a cup of tea before you...arrived."

"Well, that's...smashing. Like a ball-peen hammer meeting a kneecap." Spike strode forward, cutting a surly path between Angel and Giles so that they were forced to step aside. "Make it a cuppa blood and we're on."

"I hate waiting," Buffy said.

Willow looked up dryly from the book she was using for wynariver research. "This is news? I've known you for almost eight years now. I still remember the time you hopped the counter of the Espresso Pump because you couldn't wait for the barista to pull your bagel from the toaster."

Buffy frowned, memory access failing. "Did I really do that?"
"Finals week, freshman year."

"Oh yeah. Wow. Pause for that snapshot. That was back when I still thought I had a future."

"You still do. We're going to beat this thing." Only the edges of Willow's lips held a smile and it was a tired one, but she resumed reading, looking for answers. Even after so many years, with things so different, one head duck and she was the pose of innocence: Girl With Library Book, a sturdy supporter in the slayer's fight against evil, the best of George and Bess combined. But if she'd been a character in a book she'd never have gotten older, never changed. Somewhere in the eternal high school library, she was eating an apple and helping Buffy with homework; here she wore her hair in a loose chignon and three layers of colorless shirts against the cold and had deeper shadows under her eyes, and--and god, were those grey hairs or just a trick of the light? Here was her best friend. They'd fought and made up a hundred times over, and Buffy didn't know if they were growing further apart or just growing up.

Never mind that Willow had tested the limits of magic, or manipulated history to bring about the possible downfall of human civilization. Buffy needed her. The Titanic might be sinking, but someone still had to man the lifeboats.

"You sound so sure," Buffy said.

Willow blinked and looked up again. "Huh?"

"That we'll beat them."

"It's one of my up days," she said with a little shrug. "Mostly up," she amended at Buffy's skeptical assessment. "Okay, I had an up minute around three o'clock and now I'm cultivating my veneer of optimism."

Buffy offered a ten-watt smile. "You recovered yet from your stellar turn as Gypsy Rose Lee Junior?"

"My nipples may never unperk. Windchill. Plus, I got to strip down to my underwear in front of demons--once just a young girl's dream, now a reality."

"And for dream, read 'recurring nightmare'," Buffy guessed.

"Mm hmm."

As she talked, Willow had taken up tinkering with a small hand-sized gizmo that Buffy couldn't even have begun to describe; something with clockwork gears and turn-keys and small jointed arms like on a drawing compass, all rolled together. As Willow inserted the tip of her finger into a brass thimble, the whatsit gave a whir and a tiny blue arc jumped between two points.

"Okay, what is that?" Buffy asked. "Because I'm thinking a mechanical spider that swallowed a music box, threw it back up, then melted. How close am I?"

"I like to think of it as my flux capacitor," she said with a quirk of her lips. "But melted spider works too." Then: "It's really a wynariver. Or a model, which is as close as I can come." Her hands played restlessly with her toy, turning it over, making bits of it glow and spin.

"I'd really hoped the plans would be useful after..." Buffy hesitated. After all the trouble we went to get them, she left unsaid, but she could tell from Willow's face that she'd heard it anyway.

"They're useful. About ninety percent useful. The missing ten is the problem."
A brief silence fell. Buffy thought about the kids in their rooms without feeling any inclination to check on them. The corridor of white cells, ceiling strips dead, rooms lit by scavenged desk lamps they'd rigged up courtesy of Xander's electrical skills, had become a zone of avoidance since her visit earlier in the evening. But the cells made her think of Spike, once a prisoner there--Oz too, and she gave a moment's passing wonder to where he might be right now--but Spike distracted her attention back to him, just like always, even though he was a hundred miles away running messages. She thought of Angel for a minute, and of Giles, memories overlapping, sliding across each other like loose photos, the ones you couldn't put in the family album, so she let them go and tried to plot Spike's moves instead: how he'd make his way to Angel, what he'd do when he found him. She estimated his movements against her mental clock. Too soon for the truck to be on its way back yet. Maybe this very moment as she sat here they were researching this mess, calling Giles in England, making plans.

More likely just killing each other.

"Um..."

Willow's awkward little sound interrupted the twist of Buffy's thoughts. And, she realized with embarrassment, her hands.

"That's okay," Willow said as Buffy handed her the scrap of metal she'd unconsciously tied into a bow. "I didn't really need that part." This didn't stop her from pulling the rest of her gadgetry closer to her side of the table, Buffy noticed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's--"

"The waiting."

"The waiting." Buffy straightened her posture, pushing her shoulders back a titch. To improve her posture, her mom used to say: remember, you're not a bendy straw, you're a straight straw--the thoughts can't get up to your head if you're all bent over.

Get up to my head from where? Buffy suddenly wondered.

"You know," she said, "I can't do this. I can't mark time until Spike comes back, hoping Giles and Angel will ride in to save the day and tell me what to do next. I've spent the last few months running from one thing to the next without a plan. We've--I've just been reacting. I've got to get the 're' out and act." She stood and paced a few steps. "I talked big about how we were going to fight, ally with demons if we had to. And then this wynariver thing came up and--and I can't even blame it on that because I was scared. I was playing it safe. We've got almost nothing and no one and if I lost it--if I lost Dawn or you or Xander--"

She broke off and composed herself.

"Buffy, it's understandable." Willow sounded completely unsurprised. "That's how I felt about losing you guys. That's why I couldn't let you stop the invasion when it happened. You'd all have died by some fixed dice roll. There was no way I could sit back and watch while I lost everyone I cared about."

"But maybe you'll have to." Buffy turned, her stomach cramping, acidic with a fear she needed more than anything to control. "Maybe I'll have to. This is so big--" She made a nearly laughing sound that wasn't. "Every other apocalypse before this looks tiny in comparison. They never got far enough for me to see what it'd be like. Now I know."
She paused a moment, thinking Willow might have a response. When she offered nothing, Buffy had to quell a deep sense of disappointment. A debate-champion rebuttal might have let her put off dealing for a little while longer.

"I'm going to patrol," she said, putting on her coat. The word patrol rang oddly these days when vampires were the upstanding citizens and humans skulked in the shadows, but her duties were the same.

"Be safe," Willow said simply, as Buffy did up her top button.

It moved her without warning, like something seismic, deeper than the Hellmouth. On impulse she moved closer and bent to kiss Willow's brow the way she'd have kissed Dawn's, the way her mom used to her kiss hers.

This was all they had left at the edge of the world.

"What do you think of his story?" Giles asked.

He stood off to one side of the kitchen conferencing in lowered tones with Angel and Wyndam-Pryce—or Wes, as he'd invited Giles to call him. The man had clearly become Americanized in his time here. Across the room, Spike sat at the table, slouching back in his chair with insouciant ease as he read a copy of *EW*.

"Difficult to credit," Wes said thoughtfully. "I admit I'm prejudiced against trusting him, but even so, what he's describing would be demonic incursion on a grand scale, such as the world has not seen in centuries."

"That we know of." Giles, less at ease when off his home ground, wished for something to do with his hands. "But the letter--"

"Could be a fake," Angel finished.

"For what purpose? If it had been sent to you, I'd be more inclined to suspect his motives. But I think it's safe to say I'm a non-entity beyond the council." He sensed a sharper gaze from Wes, but ignored it lest he find pity there. "I can't imagine why any demon would choose me to further his plans." He shifted away from them, then back again, pacing out his troubled thoughts. "And there is the other evidence. The dreams, misplaced records, inconsistencies--all suggest memory tampering. I struggle to recall anything of substance from last eight years and it's," he took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose, "it's a blur. Research, books, scraps of conversations--nothing tangible or even connected to anything else."

"I've had decades like that." Angel met his eyes. "But you're right. There's something going on, and I'm beginning to think it's larger than any mischief Spike could stir up."

"You absolute wankers!" Spike said, voice rising to heated injury, drawing their attention his way. He was yelling into the opened magazine. "Nicolas Cage is about as Sid Vicious as I am Tina Bloody Turner!" Dropping his head in his hands, he groaned. "Oh god, I feel unwell." His head swiveled and one raven-dark eye scoured them. "Are you old women done fannying about, then? Made up your minds to save the world? Real big of you, by the way."
Giles sighed and turned back to the others. "Of course, we can always hold the option of killing him in reserve."

"Yes," Wes said without hesitation. "Good plan."

Angel nodded easily. "Works for me."

Xander grabbed Anya's shoulders and swung her toward the wall roughly enough to rattle the jarred herbs and toad giblets. Lips parting on a gasp, she lifted her chin and grabbed his belt, working it undone and then unzipping him. Her hair flared in an unruly crush across the wall behind her, and then she changed positions with him, knocking him into a rack of greeting cards and sending it banging to the ground. He rolled her back against the wall a moment later, pushing her skirt up her hips to cup her ass and grind into her. Soft and manicured hands pulled his dick out of his jeans, working it stiffly upright.

"Nails!" he said. "Watch the nails, baby."

She bit her lower lip and began to hustle out of her panties. Bracing his free hand against the wall by her head, Xander helped her, then put both hands up and let her guide him inside. That accomplished, she got her clutches on his ass, moving him how and where she wanted him to meet the demanding squirm of her body. He obliged by leaning against the wall as if to do push-ups, not touching her anywhere except...there.

For a minute they didn't even kiss, just looked into each other's eyes and kind of smiled around the heavy breathing. Anya of the seventeen invisible freckles, whose irises held tiny gold daggers when they caught the light. *My eyes are too widely spaced,* she'd conclude after an hour spent complaining to the mirror. *And my nose is asymmetrical. Xander, how can you stand to look at me-* -I'm deformed!*

But he looked at her now, and looked and looked, and meanwhile their hips lapped together like waves smacking pilings. *I've got a piling for you, sweet thang,* Xander imagined telling her. *Long enough and thick enough to fill your greedy little...*

But he'd learned that relationships lasted longer if he didn't say the man-thoughts aloud. Anya had very strict guidelines for dirty talk and the ability to chop down a mighty oak at thirty paces, though she was usually in closer proximity to his testicles than that. All the more reason to speaketh not naughty, but speaketh wise.

"Anya," he said simply, brushing his face against hers to smell her hair. The classics always worked best; a woman's name was the highest possible endearment--unless it was the wrong name, but only an amateur made that mistake. He'd graduated past that stage.

"Anya," he said simply, brushing his face against hers to smell her hair. The classics always worked best; a woman's name was the highest possible endearment--unless it was the wrong name, but only an amateur made that mistake. He'd graduated past that stage.

She nipped his left ear and tongued it with pointed wetness like a paintbrush, making his hips pick up speed as he nailed her. "Your face is all scratchy," she breathed.

Drawing back from the tangle of her curls he studied her cheeks and then her pretty mouth, which panted to the rhythm of his thrusts. He could ask if she liked it or if she wanted him to shave the rebel stubble. Instead, he kissed her with politically incorrect roughness, stabs of tongue leaving her as slick and open above as she was below. Just as roughly she kissed him back, piping cries
against his mouth. His arms flexed as he held himself up, hands flattened to the wall, and he drove inside her until she twisted with frantic movements he recognized and her cries reached a certain pitch, answering the question of whether it was good for her; then he could let go, thrust after violent thrust and a slide toward home, a few curses acceptable in the heat of the moment.

Afterwards, she was disheveled and sated with pleasure, patting her hair back into place, smoothing the wrinkles from her skirt, glowing and smiling in exactly the same satisfied way she did when she wrangled another ten percent discount off her wholesale prices. Her happiness was rare but amazing to see. Affection welled in him.

"Xander," she said briskly, capturing his attention as he buttoned his shirt. Hands clasped together in front of her, she did a giddy Meg Ryan hair toss. "I'm pregnant!"

He fumbled a button, missing the hole entirely. "Okay, I don't think it's actually possible for you to know that yet...is it?"

"Oh, I've known for a while now."

"Wait," he said. Then held up one finger. "Is this flight-of-creative-fancy pregnant, or oh-dear-god-we're-really-having-a-baby pregnant?"

"We're really having a baby!"

"Oh dear god."

"Are you happy? I can't tell. Your tone is fishy and unsettling. Say something happy." Anxiety pushed her voice even higher than normal while her hands made a twist of themselves.

"Oh...god." He sat down on the nearest chair and missed it by a few inches, ending up on the floor almost under the table. Since it was so handy, he lay back and let it shelter him.

"Xander!" Anya's treble bird call of worry began the moment he hit the floor. "Xander--Xander, get up. You're having a baby, this is no time to be hiding under tables!"

"Or, possibly, the best time."

"Get up, you--you baby-making swain!" Anya kicked his ankle.

"Ow!"

"Sexy, sperm-flinging blackguard! I should've known you'd try to ditch your responsibilities. You get all your little buddies to shimmy up into my ovaries, and then the first chance you get, you wriggle off like a worm to get drunk and gamble away my baby's child support."

"Anya!" He made a grab for her ankle and missed as she swung back for another kick. "Cut it out! I'm not wriggling." Well, he kind of was, but only because she kept lodging the toe of her sandal in his shin bone. Unable to quell her, he scooted back out of range. "I'm just taking some time to process this sudden and--" Scary. "--unexpected news like any normal man would do. Under the nearest piece of furniture."

"Must you behave like a chump? Do you think you're starring in a Wodehouse novel?"

"A who now?"

Anyas's heels were pacing back and forth, and even her ankles had a distressed turn to them. "I'm
going to be a mother and you're not happy. I'm going to be a mother and...and I want mine."

Not for the first time Xander tried to visualize Anya's mother, and as always ended up with a mental image of Endora making his life a not-quite-in-law torment.

"She was a small woman with strong hands," Anya said, sounding forlorn. "When the village smithy knocked up Hrefna, the idiot girl, she dragged him to the lake and buried him face-down in the mud."

Waiting with a strung-out, gut-clenched anticipation, Xander heard her sniff. Surely there had to be more. "Until...?"

"What?"

"Buried him face-down in the mud until what--until he cried 'uncle'? Until he promised to marry her?"

"Huh. You try talking with a mouthful of mud. Too late, buster."

Not missing the lack of in-laws, Xander decided. He hitched forward to the edge of the table until he could see Anya standing with her arms wrapped around herself in martyrdom, a picture of tragic, abandoned motherhood. "So...how pregnant are you?" he asked.

She stared at him as if he were crazy. "There's no 'how', breeder boy. It's either-or."

"I mean, how many months?" He got up from under the table, eyes fixed on her belly whose tiny swell could have meant too many pork rinds or nothing at all.

"Three."

"So we have six months."

Even to his own ears, his tone came out grim; Anya hunched her shoulders further at his words and took on a stricken, stunned expression. "Is it really so dreadful?"

Xander dragged himself from his thoughts and realized how he'd sounded and that without even trying he'd reduced a thousand year-old demon to tones of pleading uncertainty. He rested one hand on her shoulder and slid the other lower, fingers pushing under her shirt hem and stretching across her tummy. She drew in a breath.

"Six months to clean up this town," he said, holding her eyes. "And make the world safe for democracy and little Harrises."

"Jenkinses," she corrected automatically, but started to look as radiant as she was supposed to.

"Jenkinses."

"Kiss me!" It was a command, all breathless and shiny-eyed for want of him, Xander Harris. He was nine feet tall, he was the procreator, he was the man. He obeyed.

Before they left, Wes touched his arm and took him aside. "You were asking about Faith earlier,"
he said.

Giles's interest quickened again. "I'm not sure I understand the mystery surrounding her presence here."

"Yes, well." Wes drew in a breath. "Angel doesn't really like to talk about it."

"That I gathered."

"They used to be...close."

"Oh." Giles's brain froze on the implications of Wes's delicate tone, the idea of vampire and slayer together in a liaison banned by the council as far back as its regency stretched, and connected it with the hints Spike had let drop about his relationship with this Buffy Summers. If she was in fact what she claimed to be, and if both Wes and Spike could be believed, there was something very wrong with the current status of the slayer line. "I-I see," he went on, tipping his head a moment to force his thoughts past the resistance of not wanting to believe. "You understand that I'm here not just to investigate this matter in Sunnydale but to retrieve a slayer. The council cannot continue to operate as it has been. The slayer is its raison d'etre--without her, there is no council. When I return, it will be to arrange her release from prison."

"Of course." A halting note in Wes's manner suggested irresolution, as if were nerving himself to say more. "As to that--"

Before he could finish, Angel joined them.

"We ready?" he asked. Less question than impatient prod; he jangled without moving and his jaw was granite. "Spike's working my nerves. If we don't get out of here, I'm going to ram a chopstick through his eye socket."

Distracted, Giles frowned. "That won't kill him, will it?"

"I'm thinking lobotomy," Angel said blandly, hands in pockets. "If you do it right, it can last two, three months on a vampire."

Wes and Giles both stared at his expressionless face for several moments before Wes cleared his throat. "Well. Safe trip then."

Giles walked with Angel to the lobby where Spike was pacing and smoking; as they arrived, Cordelia flanked Spike with air freshener and began an aggressive campaign to spray him out.

"Hey!" he snapped, raising an arm to fend her off. "Watch the--"

"No smoking, you giant useless mosquito!"

Giles felt his heart skip; each time one of them provoked the vampire it seemed certain he'd lash back and deliver the grievous harm all others of his kind inflicted without hesitation. But now he only sighed, dropped his cigarette, and ground it out with his boot in a theatrical way. He'd told some half-incomprehensible story about a military chip in his head; it was beginning to look as if that too might be true.

"Let's go," Angel said, and the three of them fell into step as they headed out the door.

"Still not liking this new plan." Spike's voice was tight. "Taking the truck back was a sure thing."
"Nothing's a sure thing," Angel said. "I'm not dangling from a semi all night just to trigger an alarm or get caught during a spot inspection."

"Noooo. Might ruin the crease in your trousers." Spike cast a sidelong look at Giles. "You sure you can punch a hole in this force-field?"

"If what you've told me is accurate," he replied with acerbity.

"Sure of that, are you?" The vampire's tone was pointed back at him. "Been paying your yearly dues to the Society of Ineffectual Warlocks, Ripper?"

Giles gritted his teeth a moment before saying, "I've kept my hand in. And don't call me that. How do you even--" He caught himself and let the issue go, while Spike's mouth folded itself into a sardonic smile.

"Let's hope that hand's not as shaky as your memory."

For months Buffy had avoided Valley Center, the neighborhood around Revello Drive. Homes once belonging to humans had been allotted to Grauth bigwigs and the area was now too well policed by guards to move around in freely. From the south hill bordering the campus she could look down on her old stomping grounds and see the lights of the Army jeeps moving from block to block. There was no other traffic to distract from their circuit they made, and the longer she watched, the easier she was able to predict their repeating grid pattern: left turn, up two blocks, right turn, down four blocks...it was like Ms. Pac Man.

When she had a handle on the territory, she skittered like a rockslide down the hill and crossed through several backyards. No dogs anymore--not as pets, anyway. A mixed blessing; less risk for her, but after jumping a chain-link fence the sight of an empty doghouse and dry water bowl made her throat feel funny.

Passing by the dogless house, she heard a television and for a moment surreality took over. She thought maybe she'd just imagined it all: the invasion, the months of night, her purpose for being out and about. At a window she stopped and stepped up onto a small woodpile to peer through the curtains; through the pastel blue shades was a living room with wall-to-wall and faux wood-grain paneling and flying mallards, and on the couch sat two Grauth watching Gwyneth Paltrow on the VCR, their child stretched out on the carpet in front of them, head propped in his hands.

It was still her nightmare world.

Hands in coat pockets, she stepped out of the yard and onto Oak, walking down the middle of the empty street.

She'd always patrolled best alone, and she'd never been able to describe to Willow or Xander how it felt to pass through her town at two or three in the morning, when it was just her and the vampires and Claire, the waitress in the all-night diner who had never gotten killed, not in thirty years on the job. She couldn't tell her friends that her deepest sense of kinship was usually with the things she hunted, and she hid the extent of her willingness to toy and banter with her prey, to quip and rassle and exchange gossip, at least with the old hands. One vampire named Lewis she'd let off for three months running; night after night they'd stumbled across each other, him carrying a coffee and a doughnut bag back to his squat, her heading to and from kills. They got to know each other
by chance. She scrapped with him a half dozen times at least, but he was a tenacious mix of charm, lingering pacifism, and luck, and at least once she sighed mid-fight, lowered her stake and told him to go home, she had better things to kill that night.

And now there were no vamps to share the night with, because they had clubs to hang out in, homes to return to. It was just her, boot soles lapping at the asphalt that seemed to glitter with diamond dust around every street light. It made her feel heavy and dull; it took an act of will to veer off the road and blend into the shadows of the sidewalk. The illusion of being a ghost in her old haunts could snap in an instant if someone stepped onto their porch and saw her, a human in the wrong place at the wrongest possible time.

Until now she'd avoided her house on Revello. She'd heard from Spike that it had been taken for the use of a Grauth officer; no less than she'd expected. The slayer's old home had to be a prestigious local landmark, didn't it? If you're not going to burn it, steal it. Almost every night as she lay down to sleep in her hide-out she'd pictured her home as it must be now, taken over by demons. Before Spike had brought the salvaged keepsakes she'd imagined the walls stripped bare, every photo of their family crumpled into trash, every china plate shattered, her mother's old college watercolors carried to the dump.

Most of that actually was gone by this point, she felt sure. The house itself was left; she stood next to the giant palm and stared at it now. The house was left, but it wasn't hers.

It wasn't the first time she'd lost her home. First to go had been their house in L.A., the place of all her little-girl, mom-and-dad memories, sold to strangers. She'd hated leaving and it had taken her a long time to warm to this new address. It had never been the right shape--her feet always wanted to take wrong turns, the kitchen lay to the east, not west, and its doorway didn't have the height marks where she'd been measured before each new school year, just like her bedroom didn't have the scar where she'd kicked the wall with her ice skate during a world-class snit.

Buffy noticed that the old mailbox had been replaced; it was no longer the Summers residence, but the Khamythi. Did the Grauth even have mail service? Owls carrying letters to and from Hell? Like she cared.

Professional skulking skills and familiarity with her own property would have made it easy to infiltrate; Buffy walked up to the front door and knocked. The porch light clicked on after a few moments and the door was opened by a demon still half in uniform, jacket off and tie removed, top shirt buttons undone, cardigan softening his image. He was holding a drink in one hand.

"Yes?" he said. By some arrangement of age and feature, he looked like a beloved character actor, one of those best-supporting sorts you can't name but see in every movie. He blinked out at her in confusion as if she'd just turned up on his doorstep to sell cookies. With her signum and delicate humanity, she must not have seemed a threat. "What do you need, girl?"

"What do I need?" She mocked the question. "How about my life back?"

He began turning away at once to shout or reach for a weapon, but she darted across the threshold and seized him by the neck. The glass tumbled from his hand and he hung in hers, voice choked off by her grip.

"Or how about just revenge?" she asked.

His neck made a satisfying sound when it cracked, and she stepped over his fallen body into the hall. In the foyer she looked from side to side, checking for targets but noting the redecoration. There was noise from the dining room and she moved toward it just as someone came around the
corner, a Grauth woman in a twin-set and pearls. Buffy met her with a flat palm to the chest and threw her across a table laid out for dinner. The woman's body knocked aside a chair and dishes and a gravy bowl and she came to rest amid the destruction, an ungainly centerpiece with legs dangling over the edge.

As Buffy drew out her knife she was aware of screams on either side, the movement of small bodies scrambling from their chairs out of her way, but it didn't deter her from striding forward and planting her knife in the demon's neck. She thrust it in and wrenched it back out as a blur of motion circled the far side of the table. Gravy and blood mixed on the tablecloth and she stared at it, mind shutting down to a test pattern before she finally looked over at the two small demon children huddled in the corner, arms around each other.

When she hefted the knife the smaller child wailed and hid his face in his sister's shoulder. All she had to do was throw the weapon, retrieve it, and cut the surviving one's throat. Simple as killing kittens. Really ugly kittens who wore Gap Kids tee-shirts and probably didn't eat all their peas, and her hand wavered while she despised her own indecision.

"Stop sniveling," she said. "Stop..." Her voice broke, chin trembled. She left the room, went to the basement and got cans of gasoline and splashed them all around. Back in the dining room, the kids were still locked together; they looked up in fear as she came in.

"Get out," she said. As soon as they trusted her reprieve they ran past her out the front door, shrieking loud enough to bring help. She glanced around and picked up a burning candle from what had been her gram's sideboard and carried it to the front hall. Standing there, she took one last look around her house and then tossed the candle to the floor. Flame sheeted up from the gasoline, forcing her back outside. Up and down the street, demons were starting to open their doors and step out onto their porches, and a flare of headlights from an approaching jeep cut through the trees and bushes.

Buffy took flight.

On stage when she should have felt most trapped, she was free. Everything looked different in the gold glow of the spotlight: out in the darkness of the club, the upturned faces of the demons seemed almost benevolent as they listened to her sing. The clink of glasses and silverware was muted up here, and the edges of the room were softened.

And then her song ended and the clapping cued a zing of terror through her veins because she had to smile and walk off the stage into the wings, where other less pleasant duties waited.

"Lovely, my dear." Major Strauch clapped and beamed, gaze dipping to her low-cut gown just long enough to make her shudder. "Every night, they slip further under your spell."

If only that were true. "Thank you," Tara murmured.

The major took her arm despite her slight flinch and guided her around the curtain ropes and set drops toward her dressing room. "I'd hoped the Peacock would be merely a stepping stone for you. It's a bit louche, I'm afraid, compared to the Officer's Club. But I think we'll keep you on here. The atmosphere's more...relaxed. And I want you to be comfortable."

The major had arrested their progress and now held Tara's hand; in the narrow corridor, she was
forced to step back against the wall to keep any distance between them. His words gave terrible news, and she tried to keep panic from her voice. "But the club--I, I thought--I was looking forward--" To being in Lowell House, she couldn't say. To being close to my friends who are hidden in an underground bunker beneath your club.

"I shall do my best to make it up to you." He ducked his head closer. She turned hers. Wanting to strike him, she froze instead, one flushed cheek presented to him. If she stared at the corridor floor instead of him, she could postpone this for another moment, pretend there was nothing to fear. Then his lips grazed her cheek and she shut her eyes.

"Humans have such lovely necks," he said, planting a kiss lower. "One can see where vampires get their fetish. But yours--" She felt him draw back and stroke a line from ear to shoulder, and she twitched to face him again, forcing her eyes open. Major Strauch was frowning. "I'm afraid yours has a flaw."

"I'm sorry," she said, swallowing and hyperaware of how close his fingers were to her fluttering pulse. Fear wasn't arousal, but he might make that mistake.

"Let's fix that." He dipped a hand into one pocket and she felt the air thicken, her vision begin to grey out; but it wasn't a knife of course. Just a necklace. A filigreed trio of red stones on a gold chain that dangled from his grey fingers a moment as let her view it. "Turn," he said, and she had to. He removed the necklace she always wore, a gift from Willow, and let it drop into her hand. The cold metal of his own gift slid up around her throat like a garrote while he worked the clasp. "There." With a grunt of satisfaction he turned her again to examine his gift. "Much better."

He kissed her for real then, lips against her own, rough mustache making her think of childhood and the affection of relatives who smoked and drank too much and gave embarrassing hugs at holidays. But this was much worse, a violation, and though her hand dug against his shoulder to push him off she couldn't.

When he pulled away, he sighed. "Regrettably I must attend to business--and you, your art." He bowed his head, an imitation gentleman, and left her by her dressing room door whose gold star mocked her for being a good girl.

Tara pushed inside at once and tried with trembling hands to set the door lock behind her; but she'd forgotten, there was no lock. Her legs bumped a cushioned stool as she made her way to the dressing table. In its hard, white light and reflection she sank to her seat and saw her mouth quiver, her eyes blur. Too much lipstick, too much eye shadow. She looked like a whore, like the local girls her dad used to judge and scorn. Lifting her arms made the whore's arms lift and she hesitated, poised to remove the gaudy necklace, before letting her arms lower again.

He might come back. She couldn't wipe her face clean, couldn't take off his gift. And before she could think of what else she could do, the door opened and Malivia came in.

The Grauth woman went immediately to the dress rack and began sorting through it with pursed lips, probably searching for a gown for the next set, one that would not make Tara "look like a stuffed goose," as she'd observed yesterday. She caught Tara's eye.

"Fix your make-up," she said. "You've got the complexion of a peeled potato. The customers will think you have tuberculosis."

Goose, potato. Add some greens and she was dinner. Biting down a response, Tara turned to the mirror and swiped some blush over her already red cheeks. As she did so, her gaze fell on an envelope that had been left propped in front of the mirror, her name looping across the front,
accompanied by a single rose. She threw both away in the small wastebasket beside her table, then straightened up into Malivia's slap.

"How dare you." She bent to retrieve the note, then opened it and read it. "Another of your many admirers. You'll join him at his table after the next song." A critical look peeled another layer off Tara's composure; she didn't answer, but didn't rebel. After a moment Malivia lifted a crystal decanter that sat on the end of the table and poured a tumblerful of amber liquid. Eighty-proof fumes of rum sweetened the air when she stretched it forward.

"No," Tara said.

"Without assistance, your personality will win no favors." Unsmiling and unbending, she pressed the glass on Tara again.

Favors, Tara thought, and remembered why she was here in the first place instead of safe in bed with Willow.

The alcohol tasted like medicine, like a bad choice at a high school dance--and then it warmed her like a spell blossoming in her chest. She looked at herself in the mirror, adjusted an earring that had been coming loose, and thought: I can do this.

She took another sip to be sure.

Darkness swept by on other side of the car, broken in regularly spaced intervals by the sodium lamps along the interstate and more occasionally by the splashes of signage and lights clustering each exit. Angel was driving, "Because it's my car," he snapped when Spike tried to take the wheel. ("Sure you remember how to get there?" Spike rejoined snarkily.) Giles sat across from him, grateful for the generous width of the seats. The other vampire had been relegated to the back, looking miffed at first but gradually sprawling to fill the space and taking on the aspect of entitlement, like a debauched rock star being chauffeured to his next gig.

Giles imagined he could feel the unsouled vampire's gaze from time to time on the back of his neck; the creature had downed two tubs of pig's blood before they'd left ("God, what muck"), but pig was nowhere near potent as human blood fresh from the vein. It struck him that he was riding in a car with two--two--vampires, in a cooperative and civil fashion, when a week ago he'd never consorted with their kind at all. Not knowingly. He wished that Wes were present to provide human company on what might turn out to be a far more dangerous trip than originally anticipated. A former watcher was better than none at all.

"It's unfortunate that Wes couldn't join us," he remarked aloud. "This Harkness...he's very dangerous?"

"I really shouldn't be leaving," Angel said by way of answer. Tension marked his profile and the line of his jaw as he stared ahead at the road, and Giles sensed that most of his thoughts lay elsewhere, with the people he'd left back in L.A.

"Always the superhero." Spike's voice was a drawl of mockery. "Why, the entire city might shut down if Vamp Man here wasn't on the job, prattling across rooftops, swinging his mighty dick at the forces of evil."
"Do you ever shut up?" Angel asked, not taking his gaze from the road but directing the words back over his right shoulder with threadbare patience.

"You used to like it when I talked," Spike said in honeyed tones. "Told me my voice was like wings beating poetry against the sky."

Apparently this had been true at least once and remained unaffected in memory, for Angel compressed his lips, hunched his shoulders, and said nothing. Vaguely horrified at the turn of conversation, Giles directed his attention out the passenger side window and dearly wished he'd never crossed the Atlantic.

"Of course," Spike lilted on, oblivious to Giles's pain, "that was a long time ago, in another country; and besides, your wench was dead...and not shagging you that year, as I recall. Something about a favorite piece of horseflesh you rode to ruin. Or was it a maid?"

"Drop it."

"Oh, relax." Spike's manner turned expansive, with a gloss of false geniality that Giles felt might rub thin at any moment. "Rupert here's a man of the world, aren't you, Rupes?" Giles said nothing, but Spike didn't need a doubles partner. "And besides, we're all happy families now. I have Buffy, you've got a date with destiny."

"That's right." Angel's lips curled in amusement and his voice lightened. "You're squiring a slayer now. Not your most convincing story, Spike."

"What could I do--poor girl, heart broken, turning to me in time of need. Like a golden goddess, showing me a better way." He began speaking archly enough, but downshifted between thoughts as if something plainer and perhaps more true lay behind the facile words. At least, he sounded as though he believed them, and Giles began to contrive how he might find time to question Spike later; a souled vampire was a fascinating anomaly in itself, but a vampire without a soul who aided the forces of good? He wondered if it could be their particular bloodline--some mutant strain passed from sire to sire--that beget a disposition toward caritas.

Then again, could just be the climate. California was a land of infinite madness; it might be time to set up a field office here.

Angel chucked a laugh toward the back seat. "William the Bloody getting religion. Now why do I find that so hard to believe. Then again, when it came to the ladies you always were a bit...soft."

A growl unfurled from the depths of the car like that of a leopard sighting prey, and the hairs on the back of Giles's neck rose. Half-consciously he braced himself in his seat in case the car took a sudden swerve.

"Now you're just jealous," Spike said. He'd lowered his voice further, drawing out the words like a dagger along velvet, the subtext of menace palpable enough to make Giles turn his head. "Not having a slayer of your own."

"What would I want with a slayer?" Angel asked, his affect flatlining.

A wash of white light passing through the car illuminated Spike's face for a moment, caught in a smile of malicious satisfaction. "What indeed?"
She left her house burning behind her and ran light-footed across neighboring yards, hopping fences and keeping to the trees until she was blocks away. When she turned and peered back she could see smoke rolling up into the night sky and a chopper circling as it observed the site. Another one chattered closer to where she stood, its spotlight sweeping. Fronds of palm leaves turned brilliant white for a moment, missing her coat sleeve by inches, then moved on.

Destruction jazzed her. Why hadn't she done this before?

Striking out on a path for downtown, she evaded searches until she'd reached the historical district, which was looking more historical every day. They'd peeled up the asphalt to uncover the cobblestones; put new facades on the stores; hung ye olde signs everywhere, like the one proclaiming the Ox & Boar Tavern, which had replaced a Quizno's.

It was pretty, if you liked living in the past. Buffy didn't. The past belonged to the dead and was being forced on them by a bunch of bizarrely nostalgic goblins.

Curfew hadn't yet fallen and there were still a few people out and about, some merely getting from point A to point B as quickly as possible; others hanging about like extras waiting for their big song-and-dance number. Coming up on the Alibi Room, Buffy glanced down at the cellar door. The red light above it cast a hell-glow on the bouncer and on a knot of demons who sat on the steps smoking. Her passing ankles caught their attention and they looked up. She saw the recognition in their faces and stopped, leaning over the rail.

"Slayer," said a Dryac with chipped tusks. An Anamovic demon in a natty red suit twitched at this and hunched his shoulders. "I heard you were dead."

"Listening to propaganda will lead you astray."

"Told you," said a parasite demon to his pals. "You owe me twenty bucks."

"You bet on me?" She didn't know quite what to think about that.

"Oh yeah," the parasite demon said. "Long odds, too. Hey, you mind coming inside? Just to settle the bet. Lots of interested parties, but they won't pay up without proof."

"What, so your betting buddies can try to kill me?"

"Aw, they wouldn't do that." At Buffy's raised brows, he backtracked. "Okay, they would. But you can take care of them, slayer. I'll even help--after they pay, though. I got my own debts to cover."

Buffy hopped over the rail and landed in the stairwell outside the bar door to face the demons. "Come on," she said as they huddled with new wariness. "Let's go polish my tarnished rep. But," she paused the parasite demon with a hand to the chest, "only if you tell me your name and buy me a drink."


Past the bouncer and just inside the bar, Buffy surveyed the room. "Willy still run this place?"

"Nah," Vik said. "He moved up in the world. Got himself a new club across town, real class. All the grauts go there. Big players."
"That's right. I heard that."

"They got blackjack, baccarat, you name it." Vik paused in the middle of the room and called out to the bar's inhabitants. "Hey, look who it is. The slayer!" Mutters and growls rose in reply. "That's right. Pay up. Rico. Cheryl. Two-Nose." The last demon shuffled up and handed over a few bills, sniffing at Buffy with four nostrils' worth of disdain.

Vik was making small, tsky sounds as he counted his bills. "Dunno why I bother," he said, half to himself. "Dollar's completely devalued and the exchange rate's for--hey!"

Buffy had yanked loose a handful of bills and brought them over to the bar. "A bottle," she said to the shaggy thing behind the counter. "And none of that green stuff."

They took seats at a table. The appearance of a bottle attracted friends and they were joined again by the Anamovic and Dryac. In the marginally better light of the bar, the Anamovic's red suit showed rips and stains. All of them looked down at the heel, and as Buffy scanned the bar, she saw signs of hard times everywhere. A few more parasite demons were easing out a side exit, making themselves small as if to escape notice, but she noticed them. It might not be safe here for very long. Reporting a slayer's whereabouts to the authorities could earn some lowlife a lot of brownie points, and no one here had loyalty to her.

"So is there a reward out on my head?" she asked her drinking companions. They exchanged glances.

"A respectable one," the Anamovic said in a voice like bitter coffee-grounds. "But you won't see me going out of my way to aid the grauts." He turned his head and spat on the floor, cleaning the name from his mouth.

Buffy rested her arms on the table. "I thought it was a brave new world. A brotherhood of demons, free and equal."

Their stares were frankly amazed now, making her feel very blonde. "You kidding?" Vik said. "No free or equal here, sister, unless you're a greyback."

The Dryac pounded a fist on the table with sudden force, enough to jog their glasses and send the bottle reeling like a bowling pin, saved only by Vik's quick grab. "They carry human guns," he complained. "Roust you from bed, line you up to be counted. Shoot whoever makes noise. One peep--pow!"

"We did as we pleased before," the Anamovic put in. "Stayed out of sight, minded our business, avoided the known patrol routes--"

"Wait, what? Known patrol routes?" God, Buffy thought, had she really become so predictable?"

"--and no one bothered us. Now they make us carry identity papers, say, 'Here, come live in a nice building, like a human.' But when you do--"

"Pow!" finished the Dryac, with another sharp bang on the table, followed by a shot of vodka.

Vik sighed. "Didn't know the good old days were that good, till they were gone."

"Maybe it's time to do something about it," Buffy suggested.

"They put my brother Sumeh in a work camp." The Dryac was pouring himself another sloppy shot and his announcement quieted the others. "For getting rowdy, no more. They make us think this
vast night is ours, but they trick us." He looked at Buffy morosely. "For getting rowdy," he repeated. "But in front of a lady graut, and she takes offense. The Dryac's manhood frightens her."

"Some women are so delicate," Buffy commiserated. She took the bottle and poured drinks all around, the demons huddling closer with outstretched glasses. "So where's this work camp?"

Drinking was like packing alcohol-soaked cotton balls right into your head. Tara's thoughts were softer and heavy with memories. The candles scattered around the club tables and the jewelry on women's ears and necks made her think of holiday dinners, of the year she'd spent waiting tables at the Holiday Inn banquet room. She'd been remembering her family earlier, the family she'd disowned. She was finally alone among demons. This was the end she'd always feared, and it seemed inevitable, fate catching up with her.

She wound her way toward the table Malivia had pointed out. As she reached it, a Grauth rose and drew a chair out for her. Another Grauth remained seated, next to a human woman in a stunning blue dress. Tara nodded as she was offered a champagne cocktail and tried hard to pretend she was at ease, not gawky, not petrified to her fingertips. The woman turned toward her companion as she accepted a light for her cigarette, then extended her open cigarette case across the intimate table, offering Tara one.

Tara shook her head. "No thank you."

The woman smiled. "I'm Rosa," she said in a friendly way, then lowered her gaze to Tara's throat. "What a lovely necklace."

"I wish you'd stayed in the store." Xander couldn't keep the worried note from his voice and kept sneaking little looks at Anya's tummy. Her coat was buttoned up, so there wasn't much to see, but under those buttons was a button-sized baby, half Harris, half Jenkins. A Henkins. He didn't like to think of her carrying his unborn cub around in front of her, as vulnerable as a jelly doughnut inside the softness of her belly. Maybe he should make her some body armor--find a spare hubcap, even a nice cast-iron frying pan that she could tie around her waist.

"I'm probably safer out here than you are," she said, walking alongside him down the quiet street. "I'm building an extensive clientele in the Grauth community. They all come to me to herb away their funguses and cream off their grotty little rashes. Of course..." She gave a sigh. "Who knows how long that'll last. Oh, Xander. It's all falling to ruin!"

The baby news had crowded aside other considerations for a while, but apparently not everything was rosy in the world of Anya. "What do you mean? What's falling?"

"Everything. This magic ban--it's killing business. The wynarivers nullify anything more complex than a simple sleeping potion. But it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't?"
"A few more weeks and I'd have sold out all my stock. I'm cut off from my suppliers. Not even the Klyxx-ix are teleporting in. They had the most charming line of greeting cards." She sighed again. "Literally charming--with these cunning little pop-up hexes."

"I'm sure things will pick up," he said, though he couldn't imagine how. "You could branch out from the magic stuff, carry lingerie, novelty toys--or hey, maybe you could use your contacts with all those Grauth ladies and finagle yourself some new suppliers."

Anya stopped walking in front of a ranch-style house fenced by shrubbery, forcing him to halt with her. "I don't understand."

"Well, the trade routes are open again between here and L.A." The look on her face made his shoulders hunch toward his ears. He tried on a weak smile. "Didn't I mention that?"

"Oh my god! When were you going to tell me? Next time the sun rose? Or maybe when little Debbie here was born and squalling for food?"

"Little Debbie? Anya, that's a snackfood, not a baby name. Do you want to doom her to a childhood of playground taunting? Being pelted with cupcakes: not nearly as much fun as it sounds."

"Oh," she said, momentarily distracted. "That would be cruel. I suppose we could go with my second choice, Berkildr."

"Debbie it is, then."

Anya began walking again. "I can't believe you knew about a reopening of trade and didn't tell me. You know my feelings about commerce."

"I told you Spike went on a mission."

"What's Spike got to do with this?"

"He went to L.A. to get Angel."

"Oh my god, Xander!" She stopped again on a dime to goggle at him; he was starting to get dizzy. "What?!"

"He could have picked me something up!"

"Anya, he's trying to bring back help. Asking him to bring back a quart of milk wasn't the first thing on our minds."

"You're making light of my vocation again."

"But in a loving and supportive tone of voice." He laid a hand on her shoulder and turned her gently back in the direction they'd been heading; once more she began walking, once more he fell into step.

"I suppose I have to forgive you for not informing me right away. We did get caught up in our mutual passion."

"Thank you."

"I'll talk to Lady Elked first thing tomorrow." Anya's vision was focused inward on a web of
capitalism. "I'm sure she'll know someone influential on the supply side. I intend to have a few sharp words with Omo too. He should have bee--"

"The lights are off." Xander stood at the end of his front walk and studied the darkened windows of his house. "They must be asleep already."

"We could come back another time," Anya offered, with only a touch of reluctance. She got on well with his parents, sharing their political and economic views to a disturbing degree, offering them advice on no-load mutual funds, presenting them with inedible bundt cakes on every visit. She had the mix of blunt speech and strained good manners that distinguished her as country club material. She also thought his father's jokes were funny.

"I want to get you that heating pad. It'll be good for your back. And I think mom has some extra appliances you could use."

"That would be nice," Anya admitted as they headed up the walk. "I've been regretting my decision not to install a kitchen in the Magic Box. Not to mention that sauna Buffy wanted. If only I'd known a demon invasion was coming. Damn Willow."

"Now, now."

Xander knocked on the front door. It swung open under his knuckles. He felt the proverbial chill climb up his spine, an itsy-bitsy spider that raised every hair along its path. "No," he said, trying to ignore what he'd already seen--the cracked window pane, the broken lock, the dirty footsteps on the porch. He shoved inside and nearly tripped on the hallway runner, which was bunched up by the bottom of the stairs. "Mom!" he yelled. "Dad!"

"Mr. and Mrs. Harris?" Anya called, following him in.

He ran through every room, taking in the overturned furniture, the empty spots where things had gone missing--a chair not where it should be, a mirror no longer hanging on the wall. Bewildered, he searched downstairs and upstairs, even the basement where his old bed remained, covered in storage boxes. Returning to the kitchen he pulled open the drawers with careless force until half of them were hanging crazily on their runners.

"Xander." Anya hovered by his side. "I don't think your parents would be in there." She sounded genuinely concerned for his sanity, and he clenched his hands and sought calm, reminding himself that she said the most annoying things at the worst possible times not because she was a bad person but because she was upset, and then again, maybe in some miswired, demony part of her brain she'd calculated the odds that his parents had been shrunken down into tiny people who might live in their own cupboards and was sincerely rejecting the idea.

Any reassurance was good reassurance.

"I gave my mom a gun. It's not here. I think some of their clothes are missing--there's furniture gone too."

"So they might have just moved."

He turned his head and stared darkly at her, watched her pale white throat swallow. "Nobody just moves anymore."

"It wouldn't be the camps. They wouldn't let them take furniture."

And that was good news, wasn't it. Not the camps. Something to be happy about. With an
uprushing flare of rage, he swung around and kicked a chair, sending it flying across the room into a cabinet.

"So they're in the ghettos," he said, and gave a little laugh of less than zero humor. He stared at his mother's kitchen floor from a long, long way away. She'd always wanted to replace that tile. At the sound of his name beating against his ear, he roused himself. "She always wanted to replace that tile." It was the only thought that came out.

"An officer's life isn't an easy one," Tara's companion confided. He had an elegant face with heavy eyelids and an intricate pattern of ridges and whorls bordering the sides, as if someone had embroidered him at birth.

"No?" She tried to hit a sympathetic note.

"We carry out the orders of our superiors and gamble with the lives of our subordinates. Responsibility and blame lie equally at our feet--they hound us from the cradle of destiny to the lonely despair of the deathbed." He drew up a deep sigh and his tone of sorrow did not alter in the slightest as he continued: "And the pay--the pay is far less than you would expect."

"Oh?"

"Even for one of my rank, barely enough to keep one's tailor properly attired. By Sytos, if I didn't have family money, I'd have had to go into banking."

Rosa tinkled a laugh that drew the Grauth's attention. "Now, Colonel Sordicov, I can't imagine you anything but a soldier."

"Very kind, m'dear. I must admit, I've a family tradition to uphold. Fa and grandfa were both war heroes, you know. Took only a half-bottle and they'd be baring their wounds at the dinner table. Unmentionable places, most of them. I almost did 'em one better, though. Came damned close to losing the Sordicov family jewels in a rebel incident a while back."

"Damned rebels," the other Grauth said with feeling.

Tara darted a nervous glance at Rosa. Though she didn't know the woman at all, humanity was a bond that needed no words, or so she thought. But Rosa was gazing raptly at him, one hand resting on his arm. "It's a shame that a few unhappy souls have to ruin it for the rest of us," she said. "You've done so much for our people."

Rosa's hand slipped off the Grauth's arm and moved smoothly to pick up a drink. She met Tara's eyes now and her ruby-red lips carved up dimples as if she'd simply passed a social remark no more offensive than speculation on the weather. Tara felt something sharp and icy lodge beneath her ribs.

"Quite," Sordicov said, raising his drink to the sentiment in a lazy toast. "But then there's lovely gals like you, extending the hand of friendship, what?" He patted Tara's shoulder and she shied away, disguising her movement by reaching for her own drink. She downed it in three gulps and let a waiter refill it.

"And why should we not?" Rosa asked in a sweet tone. "We extend our hands and you fill them
Both Grauths threw back their heads and laughed uproariously. With blurred eyes and shaky fingers Tara found her glass and held it tight, wanting to drink more but afraid she'd make herself sick if she did.

"Yes, by Sytos," Sordicov said, laughter finally settling. "Well, I'd have little to offer in that area if it weren't for my good friend Aurelius. Won't hear a bad word about the man. Changed my whole opinion of vampires."

Tara squeaked a breath. "You--you know Spi--Captain Aurelius?"

Sordicov smiled at her, then spread his smile around the table. "See how the birds fluff the feathers and trill when the fellow's name is mentioned? A man might as well toss his hat in the ring with competition like that."

"I don't think you and Pyit need worry," Rosa said. "The captain is like all vampires--sweet charm on the outside, cold inside."

"You know him too." Confusion mingling with champagne, Tara stared across the candle-lit table at Rosa. She didn't know what to think. Was this coincidence, was she supposed to know something she didn't? A code word, a secret hand signal?

But Rosa said, "Everyone knows William," in a dismissive way, then got up to dance with Pyit, leaving Tara alone with her ignorance, her escort, and a cocktail that might have been her fourth or her fifth. Keeping count wasn't important, but the glass was still half full. She fixed that.

Buffy knew all the words for what she was feeling. Like Eskimos describing snow, she could classify anger and fury and rage; anger was the flimsiest; you could be angry at friends and come back from that okay. Fury she directed at people who'd wronged her, at Fate when it sucker-punched her, at the whims of monsters. But rage was wild and deep and tasted like forever. It was fuel, it was what kept her going, and it was ordinary. She carried it around with her every day, beneath the cold layers of herself, and usually she tried to keep it trapped down there, like something chained in the basement. When Angel used to talk to her about his demon, how hard he had to work to control it, she recognized herself. She was the reflection he didn't have.

She couldn't remember if she'd ever told him that or not. A lot of their conversations had been almost man-to-man, both of them saying only the minimum necessary words to get by, both of them holding onto their secrets as long as possible, until emotions blew loose and spilled out.

"That's it," the Dryac said, as they settled side by side on their bellies, peering through the brush that lined the ridge as they scoped out the camp below. "The west barracks are for humans; the east for our kind."

"So, uh, what now?" Vik asked.

Further down, the Anamovic shifted and sighed, with animosity or impatience. "Nothing now. Guards on the watchtowers, lights and dogs and guns. I don't even know why--"

Buffy flipped herself over the ridge as if performing a handstand off a horse and took off down the
slope in a zig-zagging run. Behind her she heard bewildered voices chiming and overlapping. "What is she doing?" and "Crazy slayer!" Then the sounds of them scrambling to catch up. And it was crazy, no question. The slope was bare of trees and the klaxon on the nearest watchtower was sweeping its beam along the ground toward her like the arc of a lighthouse. When it was a few yards away she stopped and dropped flat behind a rock, letting her body mimic its shadow; a collection of curses and thuds behind her indicated the others were copying her move. Then the beam passed and she jumped to her feet and began running again.

"This is madness," Vik huffed, but an upbeat note carried the words aloft, and the others began to laugh and then hoot and bellow. Which wasn't at all good, but no problem, she could switch plans midstream, if you could even call this a plan, so she let them be the distraction she needed to take the watchtower, let them rattle the fence and try to break through the mesh as she leapt straight off the ground, caught hold of a beam, and swung herself up. The tower was runged like a jungle gym; she didn't even need the ladder that zippered up the camp-facing side. Scaling its height reminded her of the night she'd raced to save Dawn on Glory's tower, and she sped up, boot soles finding traction in unlikely places.

She was trying to reach the top before any alarm was sounded, but didn't make it; its whoop began to rise and fall as she broke the surface of the platform. Heads turned and shouts rang out. Buffy kicked a machine gun from a guard's hand and sent it flying over the edge toward the ground, where she hoped one of the demons would be savvy enough to grab it. The guard went flying a moment later, off the toe of her boot, following his weapon. The remaining guard shoved himself at her, opting for hand-to-hand combat that she would have advised him against, if he'd thought to ask. Dumb demon.

A few swipes and grunts and then he was keeling sideways under her hands, looking outraged as he died. She tugged the gun from his grip, took quick stock of it, then turned, raised it across the camp, and began to fire at the soldiers running toward the fence. Some fell under her first burst; the rest scattered. Pausing, she looked around the platform: two chairs at a rickety table; bread, bottle, slab of cheese; cigarettes and lighter; coils of rope; toolbox and oil can--probably for keeping the lamp or generator running. Handy, she thought.

Two minutes later a rope was flung over the edge of the platform and a body bounced down on its length, away from flames that were billowing out to consume the structure. Bullets spat at the figure, setting it swinging. Meanwhile, Buffy spider-dropped down the other side on her own rope, out of sight of the soldiers. She made it to the ground and kicked in the door of the guardhouse that formed the base of the tower. It was empty, but through the opposite door lay the camp. As she was gearing up with deep breaths to run through it, a clatter came from behind her. She spun and barely kept from shooting Vik, who raised both hands in eager pacifism, though he held a gun of his own now.

"Just us," he said to her as the Anamovic lurched into view behind him, a bleeding bullet hole in one shoulder. Chunks of burning wood began to drop from the ceiling above them. Just us, she thought. That was actually funny. Funny, the kind of creatures who were starting to fit into her "just us" category these days. "The other one's dead," Vik added. "The Dryac."

"We're not," she pointed out. She geared herself up a second time, more deep, buoying breaths. "Ready?" She didn't say for what and they didn't ask, but nodded and followed when she burst through the door into the camp.

Bursting like that propelled her forward into a muddy field and she had only a second to orient herself before grey faces swung her way in startlement. Then she fired, and ran, and fired some more. Grauths went down, others stayed up, bullets went by her. One air-kissed her left ear,
another smacked her in the thigh, and suddenly her head was clear with shock and the fight had turned serious, deadly, better than sex. She was still running and rolling; on one roll she came up muddier than she'd ever been in her life and slammed her gun up under a Grauth's jaw, breaking it with a smack. She pulled his gun loose as he fell and leapt over him with unstoppable momentum.

The west barracks were close, one long windowless building ahead, another to her left. She didn't see any guards around them, so nothing kept her from running up the nearest set of steps and breaking in the door. Inside, dim lights showed two facing rows of bunks with a narrow walkway down the middle. People were sitting up in confusion, faces turned toward her entrance, their voices cluttering together in fearful murmurs.

"Get up!" she said urgently. For another moment they remained frozen and gaping as her nerves twisted higher, and then people began scrambling, bodies streaming by her on either side out the door. "Here," she said, blocking the first man who looked alert and competent. She pushed one of the guns into his hand. "Get them through the front gate. There's an entrance to the tunnels at the top of the ridge, near the electrical pylon."

He nodded and shouted for the others to follow him, and they swarmed. Buffy allowed herself a moment's pause to check her bloody thigh, then looked up. Above her between two lights was a ceiling vent holding a fan; she climbed wincingly toward it using a bed for a ladder, pushed the fan loose, and climbed through onto the roof. It was corrugated metal, not much of a slope, and she was able to take up a sniper position on her side. This was growing more familiar every time she did it. Much longer living the rebel life and she'd have to get herself a bandanna and a tattoo and a new name. Sarah Connor, maybe.

"Hasta la vista, baby," she murmured to a Grauth taking aim on a running woman. She fired; he didn't. Humans, one. Grauth, zero.

Standing next to Tara in the ladies' lounge, Rosa was a presence of perfume and satin, freshening her lipstick. Tara stole glimpses in the mirror, resenting the other woman's easy beauty and the treason it covered, and trying not to show her feelings. Further down the counter a Grauth woman touched up her wig and then snapped her purse shut, darting a spiteful glance at them as she left. Rosa watched her go in the mirror and turned to Tara as the door swung shut behind her.

"Are you all right?" She touched Tara's shoulder, the curve of her fingers a soft question mark.

Drawing away, Tara nodded. "I'm fine." Uncertainty made her voice clipped and impolite.

"It's hard at first."

Tara swallowed down acrid bubbles of champagne, hating the kindness of Rosa's eyes. "At first?" she repeated. She felt stiff, unyielding, but the words came out in a waver.

"Pretending. Not screaming when they touch you."

The recognition of a shared truth seized Tara's gut. "Are you--did Spike send you?"

A head shake. "He didn't mention you'd be here. He pointed you out though, at the Winter Ball, during your last song. He said you were a friend."
"He said that?" The strange turns of fate hit her with terrible suddenness and tears pricked her eyes.

Rosa smiled slightly and imparted another layer of meaning with her direct gaze. "A friend of ours, he said."

"Oh. Oh, yes. I'm that, that kind of friend." Relief at having caught some part of the code at last made her almost giddy and she blinked away her absurd tears.

"Did he place you at the club?"

"No. I'm not even sure he knows I'm here." She frowned. "Did he...place you?" She wasn't entirely sure what that meant, but the sound of it disturbed her. Rosa's job description was much clearer and more obvious than her own.

"Yes. Yes and no. I'd be here anyway. He just makes my time here more useful." There was an edge to her voice for a moment, and something Tara recognized as resignation.

It seemed safe enough to confess, "I don't know what I'm doing here. I was supposed to be at the Officer's Club by now. I was just supposed to be singing." Rosa laughed at this, and it sunk in for the first time how unlikely that was. "I mean, singing and listening for intel?" The word was too strange for her to say without self-consciousness.

"There's information to be learned." Rosa glanced at the lounge door, then back at Tara. "We'll talk later, where it's safer. I can help."

Except it wasn't just singing and listening, and Tara wasn't sure any help would be enough. "I don't know if I can do this."

"Drinking is good," Rosa said matter of factly. She removed a compact from her clutch bag and handed it to Tara. "This is better."

Bemused, she took the compact, thinking at first this was another critique of her washed-out appearance. But inside the case there was loose black powder that looked nothing like make-up. Rosa licked a fingertip, laid it in the powder for a moment, and then licked her finger clean again.

"I don't understand," Tara said.

An old smile crossed Rosa's young face. "Like I said, nina. I can help."

"She was young, she was pure, she was new, she was nice--she was fair, she was sweet seventeen! He was old, he was vile, and no stranger to vice--he was base, he was bad, he was mean--"

Giles pressed fingers to one temple where his pulse was throbbing and tried to massage away his impulse to whip around and shove a stake through Spike's ribs. Angel seemed even closer to snapping; Giles thought he heard the steering wheel creak in his tightening grip between snatches of Spike's off-key singing. Pressured by Angel's foot, the car was accelerating, speed conveying anger without a word. But he had a word.

"Spike!"

"--and he said as he hastened to put out the cat--"
At some other time, in a pub, were he rat-arsed drunk, Giles might almost have been charmed. The vampire had the rollicking, good-natured tone of someone who could amuse himself with a piece of string, and he was so flamboyantly, flag-on-your-sleeve British that he stirred a pang of homesickness under Giles's vest.

"Do you mind?" he said aloud, and then let his voice taper off, speaking more to himself: "Some of us are trying to retain the few scraps of sanity we woke with this morning."

As Giles had hoped, the temptation to ridicule was sufficient to divert Spike from song. "Don't know how much you've got left," he said, "but you'd better hope Angel Heart here's got more. Nasty blighter when he loses his soul, isn't that right, o sire of mine?"

"I haven't lost my soul yet, Spike, but when I do, you'll be the first to know."

A chuckle drifted forward. "God, I can't wait till we hit Sunnydale--be like a very special episode of 'This Is Your Life'."

Giles glanced across the seat at Angel's stoic profile. It was clear to Giles that the other vampire had sensed the same pattern to Spike's remarks that he had; during the trip, the blond nuisance in the back seat had taken great pleasure in needling them both, making them doubt themselves and wonder what surprises their amnesia might hide. Already taciturn, Angel had only grown more so as time passed. But it was impossible to ignore Spike's provocations completely. He was like a child, a rambunctious five-year old. Giles was surprised he hadn't yet begun kicking the seat.

"You know," Giles said. "We've been theorizing that the memory spell affects everyone outside the town--this, er, Sunnydale."

Shifting sounds came from the back seat. "Yeah?"

"Why weren't you affected when you left?" He slid the question out smoothly, a rapier aimed only with blind suspicion; there might not be anything to hit, but Giles wasn't yet convinced of Spike's trustworthiness.

"No idea. Might be immune."

Not an unreasonable reply. Spells could work a number of ways. Angel, looking over, seemed interested in the question. "It does make sense," Giles conceded, working it out in his mind. "If deliveries are passing in and out of the barrier, the drivers would need to remember--well, the point of their journey, for one thing. It will be interesting to see if we retain our own memories when we leave again."

"Not especially interesting if you don't remember," Spike pointed out.

"Er, yes."

The shifting sounds from the back had been replaced with the crinkling noises of cellophane immediately recognizable to any ex-smoker. Angel stiffened, a movement like the infinitesimal ripple of a mountain before an avalanche crashes down on someone's unsuspecting head.

"You light that and I make you eat the entire pack."

"Give us a rest stop then." Spike's voice held a tense, nicotine-deprived edge.

"You can wait."
"You desperately need a vice." Frustration shaded into coldness now, a drawl that held nothing of Spike's previous humor.

"How about homicide?"

"Berk."

"Jackass."

Giles bit his tongue and stared out the window. A green sign loomed up in the headlights and then was swallowed from view. Sunnydale - 20 Miles, it said. For one brief moment it caught his attention and he opened his mouth to speak, but then the words dimmed, the thought forming in his mind came apart like smoke, and the moment was gone.

"Peasant."

"Mama's boy."

Giles sighed.

It was amazing how much damage you could do with a single rifle and a secure firing position, especially when your enemy was disorganized and overrun by a desperate crowd. Buffy had watched a score of Grauth soldiers fall under a tide of people willing to tear apart anything in their way. They'd made the gate, joined by the human residents of two more liberated barracks, and an equal number of demons of all races. The demons weren't as cohesive in their freedom, many of them scattering as soon as they were freed, but they did more damage.

Some of the damage was to humans, but Buffy couldn't cover everything. She'd jumped from the roof and back into the fray when she ran out of bullets, and slayed a few demons who didn't embrace the spirit of alliance. Bodies lay all around, human and Grauth and parts unknown. She ran into Vik near the corner of a bunkhouse.

"Is everyone out?" she asked.

"We've cleared the camp," the parasite demon said. "But the greybacks gotta have backup on the way." He cocked his head skyward and she heard what he'd heard, the beat of choppers approaching. "Time to vamoose."

They ran toward the gate together, the sound of helicopters getting louder along with trucks and possibly tanks. "If we had a way to blow the tunnel entrance," Buffy plotted aloud, "they'd have a hard time following us."

"Grauts hate tunnels," Vik said. "Makes 'em puke. Sensitive little pugs. Hey, hold up." Stopping short of the gate entrance, he snagged a fresh gun from a dead Grauth. "Ammo," he said with a cheerful grin and then coughed his bloodied teeth out of his head and fell dead at her feet. Buffy had the weapon up again immediately to take out the shooter. After that there was nothing left to do but keep running.

She made it to the tunnel entrance and found a handful of people still crowding around it. They looked frayed and freaked out and became even more panicky when she appeared. And then one of
them, a girl, asked, "Are you the slayer?"

For a second, Buffy felt the same unguarded shock that Clark Kent might feel after dropping his glasses. "Yes," she said. "Slayer, me." God, that was sad. "You, dead--if you don't get into that tunnel."

Herding them forward, she tried not to feel her luck running out, the enemy closing in. Escape demanded total focus. But as she was pulling the grate shut behind her, she heard a groan in the nearby brush and hesitated. "Hello?" she called, anxiety kicking her under the ribs.

"Here," someone said weakly.

Buffy stepped back out of the tunnel, hand tightening on her gun, and moved toward the bushes, where she could now see a pair of stretched, immobile legs. Someone was sitting against a tree, face turned away. She saw shabby pants first, then two gnarled hands covered in blood, folded together over a stained shirt.

When the figure rolled its head her way, she saw it was the Dryac from the bar, tusks hanging low from slack face muscles. "Oh, hey," she said warily. "Vik said you were dead."

"You believe everything from a demon's mouth?"

"Point." She knelt next to him and examined his wound. He growled when she tried to push his hands away. "Let me see." He sighed and submitted to her attention, his blood warm and jam-like under her fingers. "Did you find your brother?"

"I find him, we're escaping, I'm shot--pow! He goes on."

"He just left you?"

The Dryac sighed, a huge sigh, a sigh that could have huffed a house down, an almost Russian sigh. "He's a shmuck."

"Family's like that," Buffy said, tugging at a beefy arm. "C'mon."

"Go." He lifted one paw and waved his nippers negligently. "I die here alone now. Forgotten like a--"

She propelled him to his feet and cut the mournful dying scene short. "Shut up and move."

They lumbered into the tunnel in time to avoid being seen and Buffy drew the grate closed on the tunnel's entrance, hating its inadequacy and not at all sure that the prospect of vomiting was a strong enough deterrent for the Grauth soldiers on their heels. From up ahead, she could hear the splashing feet of the escaped prisoners. Deja vu. All her dreams took place in tunnels these days.

"They'll follow us," the Dryac noted.

"Probably." Buffy kept moving and kept glancing around, hoping to spot an idea somewhere in the vicinity. The only light came from grated manholes above them. At the next one a half dozen men were waiting.

"Slayer," one said with a nod. "We need to make a barricade."

Startled, Buffy hesitated a moment, then shrugged out from under the Dryac's arm. "Here." She pushed him at a few of the men. "Get him someplace safe." She noticed their exchange of looks
and the squeamish way they held him upright. "He helped free you," she told them. "Get over it."

"I'm an engineer," the first man said as the others left. "This whole stretch of tunnel was built at the
turn of the century. There's earthquake and flood damage--the mortar's weak." He traced his finger
along a crack that separated the bricks in a long, jagged line. "If we can find something to use as a
crowbar--"

"Stand back," Buffy said. The remaining men glanced among themselves, then moved away. She
gauged the wall carefully--no good putting full force into her kick just to break a heel. That'd be
embarrassing. When she'd taken her best guess, she twisted sideways on one foot and slammed a
boot into the bricks. It took a few more kicks before the wall really started to crumble, but the
effect was even better than she'd hoped.

"It's caving in!" one of the men warned her. Hands pulled her away as the tunnel sides collapsed
and a cascade of bricks and earth fell from above. They were left in complete darkness, the air
around them heavy with dust. A few coughs broke the settling silence.

"Well," Buffy said. "I think that worked."

"This doesn't look promising," Angel said, gazing at the flat empty road ahead of them. The car
idled on the roadside, doors open, engine purring to itself. Crickets chirped from the depths of the
grass.

Spike was standing in the middle of the motorway and turning in a circle, frowning at local
landmarks. Broken white lines stretched away into the darkness in either direction. His hair was no
less white and stuck up like a rabbit's fur, while his jumper curled away from his neck in a heavy
droop under the swish corduroy jacket. Looking lost made him appear even younger, and Giles had
to remind himself not to take vampires at face value.

Turning on his heel again, Spike stared head cocked at the gas station to their right, and Giles
followed his gaze. With its vintage architecture and tiny pumps, it should have been abandoned
decades ago, but the adverts, neon, and general tidiness said that someone was keeping it alive.
Around them California pines nodded, but just down the road they thinned into low, rocky hills
backing a flat desert.

"This is it," Spike said, his face and tone firming now. "Definitely."

It was hard to credit the sudden certainty. "Are you sure?" Giles asked, injecting warning into his
tone. "If I use the spell ingredients, and this isn't the place--"

"Here." Spike walked over to the verge, knelt, and brushed something off from the dust. Angel and
Giles came up behind him and looked down over his shoulders. It was a road sign that had fallen to
the ground, painted with what seemed to be a sun. "Welcome to..." it said, but where it welcomed
travelers to remained a mysterious blank.

"This is useless," Angel said and walked off a few paces. "There's nothing here."

"That's what I'm telling you." Impatience had a way of rounding Spike's words into an almost
cultured contempt. "Town starts here," he nodded toward the trees, "right where the nothing does."
"We've been up and down this road three times, Spike. There's nothing out there but rocks and sand." Anger was starting to escape around the edges of Angel's control.

"I'm telling you--"

"All right," Giles broke in, keen to derail another argument before it got started. "This may be part of the magic's design, to deter discovery. Which would answer the question of how an entire town could be in effect wiped off the map."

"Yeah." Spike spared Angel a brief, superior look, as if he'd received corroborating testimony in a court case, then gave more businesslike attention to the road. "Barrier's got to be 'round here somewhere." He stretched a hand out and patted the air in front of him, obviously trying to feel it out, face showing effort. Giles rolled his eyes.

"We've just driven through it," he reminded the vampire, withholding the "you stupid berk" he wanted to suffix onto his comment.

"Oh, right."

"But if the sign was accurately placed..." Giles knelt where Spike had and uncovered the post holes in the ground. "The barrier should run along here." His fingers traced a rough line through the dirt and grass toward the edge of the road. Though he'd scorned Spike's own attempt, he surreptitiously let his hand linger a moment and tried to attune himself to any trace energies.

"Well, then. What are we waiting for? Let's not stand here all night ducking the fog and jiggling our plums. Chop chop."

Giles rose to his feet without hurrying and looked at Spike askance. "The spell bag is in the car." When Spike loped off to fetch, Angel allowed himself to move nearer again. They exchanged a glance. "It's like slapstick," Giles observed, taking off his glasses and running a hand through his hair. "With the sound turned up too high."

"He doesn't grow on you," Angel informed him in the voice of experience.

"Nor did Benny Hill." Giles paused. "Actually, the similarities are rather striking." He put his glasses back on and focused on Angel. It seemed a moment inviting candor, some recognition of forged bonds. "I have, however, enjoyed the opportunity to meet and work with you--though perhaps enjoyed is, is not the word--" He was turning self-conscious under Angel's unwavering gaze. "But to discover now, so late in my career as a watcher, a vampire with a soul--" Another drawn breath. "I must admit it's inspiring. It challenges all our preconceptions. I'd even go so far as to say--"

"Here," Spike said, thrusting the bag at Giles, forcing him to take it before it fell.

"Thank you," Giles replied with restraint, as he imagined cuffing the vampire's head like one would a puppy. It took him less than a minute to lay out the ingredients he'd prepared and draw a configuring line across the road--they'd best drive in, after all. The vampires flanked him like a pair of lions, watching with detached interest.

As the final of several steps, Giles took a pinch of powder from a small brown bag and tossed it "Sis modo dissolutum. Exposco validum scutum." For a moment nothing happened.

Spike made a sound of derision. "Well, that's a--"

The air in front of them flared brilliantly as if a match had been touched to oiled paper, burning out
from where Giles had cast the powder to reveal an entirely different landscape than the one they'd
driven through previously. Through the hole in the barrier they could see the continuation of trees,
their branches curving down to meet in an arcade of velvety darkness that narrowed with distance.
The white lines of the road seemed to be directing them toward a precise spot, an end not yet
known. The optical effect of forest against false desert was disorienting, but confirmed everything
Spike had said. Giles let out a breath he hadn't been aware of holding.

"Home, sweet hell." Spike got back in the car. Angel and Giles followed suit with less sureness.
Once in, Giles belted himself up with a sense of apprehension, feeling as if they might lift off the
ground at any moment.

Angel let the car roll ahead slowly, but Giles braced himself as they drove through the barrier,
readying himself for--and even as he thought it, was groping to name his fears and nebulous
expectations, the shape of his world dissolved and reformed and shoved seven years' worth of
forgotten memories into his head.

The car accelerated, swerved, and screeched to a halt diagonally across two lanes. Angel got out
and stumbled a few feet away, back to them, head down, hands to his face.

Giles breathed. In and out was the trick. Buffy, he thought and then blurted it aloud as it hit like an
aftershock. "Buffy...dear god."

"Remembrance breaks like the dawn," Spike said, with no real sympathy. "Must be a bit of a--"

An arm drove into the car and ripped the vampire out, pulling him right over the seat. After taking
a moment to collect himself, Giles got out of the car on his own side and walked around. Angel had
Spike half on the asphalt, shirt fisted in one hand, and was pummeling him in the face again and
again. Giles wasn't especially inclined to interrupt, but his own anger paled against that display,
and as memories continued to join up with present events in puzzle-piece clicks, the inevitable
realization of Spike's actions struck him.

"Angel," he said sharply, and the vampire's head whipped around to reveal game face.

Spike took advantage of the distraction to grab his opponent in a delicate place that leveled the
odds. Roaring, he tossed Angel to the ground and got in a few good kicks before the older vampire
rose again. They faced off with snarls.

"Enough!" Giles said. His tone seemed to surprise them; two heads turned as the vampires gave
him the identical, measuring expressions of predators. "Just...enough."

His follow-up may have been weak, but as he circled back around the car he could see their
postures shift into grudging truce, and they returned to join him, simmering like teenage boys
chastised by a father, their presence and animosity bringing into sharp recollection every fight,
every death, every tragedy, every loss that Giles had ever suffered on the Hellmouth.

Sliding in next to him in the front seat, Angel cast a look his way, one of those assessing looks he
practiced when maneuvering around other people's grief, a look shadowed in self-awareness and
history and guilt. Not enough guilt, though. Never enough.

"Giles," he began.

"Drive," Giles said with a new harshness. Five minutes new. Five years old.
The bird watching over the Peacock Club door had lost feathers from its tail, and half the letters in the sign had burned out, leaving its message lopsided and obscene. On the wet ground, neon lay mirrored in a black puddle, legible until Willow's footstep disturbed the water. The club door was green, and the bouncer let her through with a nod. She could hear Tara singing as soon as she entered, high notes winding back to her through the curtains. Flaming torches ensconced on the walls led Willow forward until she reached the end of the hallway. A mirror hung in front of her and she smoothed her hair, trying to brush off the raindrops.

"I lost my hat," she observed to herself with a touch of anxiety, then glanced down at a table where several hats had been laid out for selection; a crooked witch's hat, a baseball cap, a naval tricorn, and a sombrero. She put on the witch's hat and tried for several moments to straighten the peak, but it was hopeless. Turning away from the mirror she noticed that the hall stretched in both directions and each way looked exactly the same: the same flocked wallpaper, red velvet on a white background; the same torches; the same dark red carpet runner. All the doors were closed. She had to choose a direction, but nothing gave a hint of which way was better.

"Tara," she called. "Tara, honey?"

When she heard a rise in the singing, she moved toward it. Several steps down the hall it began to grow darker, so she took a torch from the wall to light her way. The further she went, the less familiar the club looked. The fancy whorehouse wallpaper faded into tatters, then gave way to bare wood. The hall had become a mining tunnel, the carpet runner a set of tracks. Around her, embedded in the walls, chunks of green rock glowed. Stopping, she worked one loose and held it up to her face for a moment, staring into its heart. Sweat was breaking out on her temples; her breath coming in short gasps.

"Willow!"

Letting the rock fall, Willow staggered down the tunnel, feet catching in the ties. "Tara!" Fear crushed her chest. She'd allowed herself to be weakened and distracted and Tara needed her now, but she was tripping and sprawling on the ground, her torch rolling away, dropping into a crevasse. Willow got to her hands and knees and pulled herself forward, wooden ties splintering in her hands-and then the world shifted and realigned itself and she realized she was climbing a ladder, up out of a hole, trying to reach the top where Tara waited. They were all waiting on her. For one moment she saw a hand stretching down and heard her lover's voice, but when she looked up again to take hold, the hand was gone.

It took all her strength to pull herself to the lip of the hole and crawl out, and as she drew eye-level to people's feet and ankles they began to walk away. "Wait," she said. "I'm ready!" She made it to her feet. "I'm prepared," she assured them. "I have my notes!" Somehow, though, her notes weren't in her pockets or under her hat, and removing her hat might have been a mistake because the wind tore it from her hands, whirling it past her friends and into the widening portal like a witch into a tornado, taking all her powers with it.

"No!" she cried. "You can't do this without me!"

But her friends had lined up in fighting stance with their backs to her, swords raised. Only Tara took a moment to glance over her shoulder. She smiled reassuringly, face so lit with eagerness it almost brought Willow relief. "It'll be okay," Tara told her. "We have the -----." Her lips formed a silent word that Willow make out.

"I can't--I can't hear you."
Still smiling, Tara turned away, just as the portal blew open in a wave of light--

"No!"

At the touch to her shoulder, Willow came awake. Jonathan was retracting his hand as if he'd just awakened an unfed dog and eyeing her with nervous respect.

"You were dreaming," he said as she tried to collect her wits. "And talking. I figured I should wake you. Even if it's just from one nightmare to another."

Jonathan had three tonal settings: edgy bitterness, confusion, and a subdued resignation that he was expressing now. In most other people this would have been tiresome, but he tickled a liking out of her the way a cynical comedian might, Woody Allen with weltschmerz, and she managed a smile now.

"Thanks. This is the better nightmare." As she was straightening and stretching, she knocked the wynariver model aside a few inches with her wrist. Annoyed, she picked it up and turned it over a few times, itching to throw it across the room.

"How's it coming?" Jonathan asked, gaze moving across the components scattered on the table top. Something in his question vaguely registered on her--a note of genuine interest, like that of a fellow doctor asking about a case.

"If I were designing a paperweight? Really well."

"You know," he began diffidently. "If you want, I could--"

"Some help here!"

Their heads snapped around at the urgency of Buffy's hail and Willow stood up fast, trying for one disorienting moment to curl her hand around a spell in case they were under attack. But she came up empty. Luckily it wasn't an attack; the people flooding into the Initiative behind Buffy had no weapons and looked too ragged to fight.

Buffy helped a wounded demon to a seat while Willow and Jonathan gawped. "We need food and blankets," she said, an imperative that got them moving.

"What's going on?" Dawn asked, coming up with sleep-wrecked hair but a wide-awake face. Kethas and the other kids trailed up next to her, staring at the swelling crowd.

"Refugees from a work camp--and maybe some recruits." Buffy left the Dryac slumping on a crate and gave her sister a moment's full attention. "I need you to help me sort them out," she said. Dawn looked amazed for about half a second and then nodded. "We'll need to triage the wounded, draft the able ones to help us, set up sleeping areas--" The list of tasks was dizzying and daunting, and she swept a gaze across the room, wondering if she was forgetting anything important.

Dawn squeezed her arm with more sisterly camaraderie than she'd shown in weeks. "So we need to be bossy and redecorate. No problem." She gathered Kethas, Dor, and Marcos around her and began cracking out orders. "See if there are any doctors," Buffy heard her say to Dor.

Not letting herself rest--if she did, she'd never get up again--Buffy took an armful of blankets and began moving through the crowd, handing them out to the needier looking refugees. Some were barely dressed and blue around the lips, their feet muddy from the tunnels. When she ran out of blankets, she found more; it was one thing the Army'd left behind in fine supply. Across the room, Willow and Dawn were arranging the wounded in rows on the work-out mats, while Jonathan
unboxed what medical supplies they had. The kids were passing out food. It looked like Thanksgiving in a homeless shelter.

"Get your disgusting demon stench away from me," someone said angrily from nearby.

"Humans have such sensitive noses. Fragile too, I hear."

Buffy turned to see a man squaring off against a red-skinned demon. Before she could break in, they launched themselves at each other, grappling and cursing. She dropped her blankets and made a limping leap, got one hand in the man's collar and pulled him back, and saw the demon reel away with equal force, not his own, to end up dangling from a familiar hand.

"Angel," she said. Her grip loosened and the man she'd been holding freed himself and edged off.

"Buffy."

He sounded the way she felt; surprised not by the meeting, but by the sight of her. Through his eyes she became conscious of the filth and blood on her clothes; his own were impeccable, the height of L.A. fashion. It was all she had time to notice before her gaze found Giles. He stepped forward to meet her, and she could see his face decomposing—not in a zombielike way, but as if he'd meant to control himself and was losing the battle. He had on a tweed jacket, a vest, and a maroon tie she'd given him one Christmas. It was like seeing him step out of a photograph from a better time. She wanted to pour herself into his arms, but muddiness held her back for two, maybe even three seconds until he said her name. Then she let him pull her into a hug.

From the corner of her eye she could see Spike hanging back and watching; if she turned her head, she knew she'd see Angel doing the same. For a moment the sense of being surrounded by men, tall creatures who smelled comfortably of Old Spice and tobacco, gave her little-girl goosebumps. To shake the feeling, she mocked it.

"I'm glad you're here," she said, stepping back to regard Giles and putting heartfelt relief into her voice. "We haven't made any decisions without you. How long until you solve all this?"

The deer-in-the-headlights expression that hit his face was beautiful. "Er, I--I don't really know that I--I mean, I'll certainly try my best, Buffy, but--" Spike snickered to himself while lighting a cigarette and Giles caught on and relaxed with a nettled sigh. "That was very unkind," he told her. "I might have had a small cardiac arrest."

"Sorry. Actually, I decided not to wait for the white-horse brigade." She made a slight gesture toward the chaos behind them.

"So I see," Giles said.

"What've you been up to?" Spike asked, frowning at the room as if trying to piece together his own answer.

"Raided a work camp."

"Work camp?" Angel said.

Buffy looked at Spike. "Didn't you fill them in?"

"Thought I'd save the juicier bits for you, love." The words fell short of a leer, but Angel's scowl measured the difference, and when Spike turned his head to reveal his black eye Buffy began to get an inkling of the fun she must have missed.
"Hey," a voice said, drawing their attention. The red-skinned demon was still hooked in Angel's grasp, collar choked up to his chin. "Why don't I leave you folks to your conversation?"

Angel let the demon go at her nod. "Strange bedfellows," he said expressionlessly, watching the demon leave, then swung a loaded look back on her.

"We need allies," she said before Spike could come up with any glib retort. "We're dying here, Angel, in case you hadn't noticed." His gaze followed the wave of her hand across the room, took in the wounded. "We need them more than they need us."

"I'm sorry," he said before Spike could come up with any glib retort. "I didn't mean--"

"Don't apologize," she said, her heat already burnt out. "Just deal."

A nod of acceptance. "I'm here to help." He spoke simply, without self-aggrandizement, and she knew it was a promise.

"So there you go." Spike pitched his cigarette on the floor and ground it out. "One hero, signed, sealed, and delivered...oh, and Giles." The dismissive afterthought made Giles angle a dirty look at the vampire, who pretended not to see it. "I'll just be on my way then."

Sometimes Buffy wanted to smack him so bad it was a physical pain. But she also needed to thank him, and to let him know he hadn't been replaced. "You could stick around. Help keep the rowdies in line."

"You've got one vampire, pet. Don't need two."

But I've got only one insufferable, self-pitying vampire, she thought of saying, annoyed that he couldn't read her mind or the message she was trying to get across.

"Specially not when one of them's the Caped Crusader," Spike went on, working up a casual, almost friendly jibe at Angel. "Poseable as an action figure, and just as anatomically incorrect."

"You're right," Angel rejoined mildly. "I think we can take it from here. We wouldn't want to risk frying your motherboard in a brawl. But if we come across any kittens that need rescuing from a tree--"

Spike growled and Buffy was gearing up to play ref when Xander came in shadowed by Anya and radiating a mood so electrically charged it shorted out any further confrontation. He glanced at Giles and Angel, gave a brief "Hey" that left them nonplussed, and stopped in front of Spike.

"I need your help," he said flatly. "You do what I want, when I say, no argument. You do this favor for me, and I will do anything for you." Spike, eyebrows on the rise, began to look intrigued, and Xander paused, letting the terms burn into the air between them. "Anything."

"Anything except sex," Anya amended. "Right, Xander?"

Xander and Spike continued to contemplate each other in the ultimate stare-down while an awkward pause swept over the group. Anya folded her arms and looked far more piqued and worried than she should.

"Xander?"

Buffy liked to pretend she blacked out around that time.
"Xander!"

The End

Chapter End Notes

Feedback always welcome.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
Fifteenth ep in an AU 8, with an AU season 7 in between; everything branches off from "Gone." All our base belong to Joss. He is the demon-god to whom I've sacrificed all my children.

For this particular story several people kindly read the final beta drafts to make sure that things were not too confusing, and I got some really invaluable feedback from Kalima, Herself, Laura, Bone, and Barb, who made things way much better. (Me talk pretty.)

You surely must understand, Bohr, that the whole idea of quantum jumps necessarily leads to nonsense. If we are going to have to put up with these damn quantum jumps, I am sorry that I ever had anything to do with quantum theory. -- Schrödinger

Something unknown is doing we don't know what. -- Sir Arthur Eddington

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"Anything except sex," Tara amended. "Right, Dawn?"

Dawn and Willow continued to contemplate each other in the ultimate stare-down while an awkward pause swept over the group. Tara folded her arms and looked far more piqued and worried than she should.

"Dawn?"

Spike flashed on an image--three birds in a bed--and shoved that one into his mental wank drawer.

"Dawn!"
"Yeah, all right then," Spike broke in, ready to move the conversation along. Dawn was just a chit of a girl no matter how tough a game she talked. Give her to Willow and it'd be like putting the chick in the cat's mouth. "What's up, petal?"

"My foster parents." Dawn turned away from Willow, eyes blurring when they met his. "They're in the ghettos."

The Harrises. Not even blood relations; though if you were an ex-key created by meddling monks, that point might be moot. Family was family when it came down to it, and Spike gave a nod that passed for sympathy. He couldn't tap a deep well of the stuff, but Dawn never asked for much.

"Rough," he said, feeling uncomfortable, gaze shifting to Xander to see how he was taking the news of his folks. No love there, no sign that blood was thicker than venom.

"You've got to get them out," Dawn said. But her demand was to Willow, which left Spike unreasonably miffed. Apparently him being a great and mighty vampire slayer didn't cut it these days, least not when it came to graut politicking. Fair enough. Still, she might have looked to him. Derring do could be done. He could swoop in, say, under cloak of darkness, and--

"Is that a fact?" Willow seemed amused, but not enough to provoke a fight.

Buffy had moved to her sister's side and was touching her arm rather awkwardly. "Dawn. I'm so sorry. Can I do anything?"

"I don't know." Dawn gave her a stony-faced look. "Can you do anything?"

"I could--" Buffy hesitated as if wanting to make promises she didn't know how she'd keep. She glanced at Willow, a touch of resentment obvious. It was hard to say if Dawn's dismissive snub shut down further offers or if Buffy just admitted defeat, but she fell back a little and didn't finish whatever she'd been planning to say.

"You can pull strings, right?" Even asking for help, Dawn glared at Willow. "Get them moved back home?"

At first Willow seemed indifferent to the plea but then she caught Spike's eye and something in her face shifted. "Right," she said to Dawn, sounding almost pitifully eager now. "Of course, no problem! I mean, I think. How hard could it be? Grease a few palms, kick a few backsides--"

From an aloof stance near the wall, Xander made a skeptical sound, and in Pavlovian response, Willow bristled, lips unpeeling just a mite, fingers curling.

"So that's settled," Spike put in quickly, before they could tilt lances for another one of their endless jousts.

"Not to cramp anyone's fun," Angel said. He'd come up silently enough to startle a few people. "But there are better uses for our time." He sounded irritable in his quiet way, and Spike noticed he had blood streaking his hands and shirt. Not the tasty dinner kind, either.

At his reminder, everyone looked with various levels of guilt toward the sprawling disaster area behind them. Moans came from the pallets where the wounded lay, and the churn of voices and smells, along with the rising heat, made Spike edgy and restless.

"What's the sitch?" he asked.

"Two dead, a dozen more on their way. Gunshots. Messy." Angel didn't blink as he relayed the
information. "The rest aren't so bad. We found a few doctors."

"Good," Spike said absently, still gazing at the people. It was like standing on a tiny island in a sea of blood, a thin reef of friends separating him from the mass of wet, wailing humanity he'd rescued. Part of him--the monster he couldn't shake, always hungry--just wanted to fall back and drown.

"You did a hell of a thing tonight," Xander said, his praise coming out of the blue. He didn't move from where he was standing, but it was as if he'd suddenly stepped closer.

Spike kicked away the temptation of pride. No point getting used to it, since he had none most days. "Got lucky, that's all."

"Not all good luck," Angel said, and Spike was ready to snap back at the bleeding obvious until he realized the other vampire was staring at his bleeding thigh. "You've been shot."

"Yeah?" Spike glanced down with a frown. "Didn't notice."

"Might as well dig it out now." Angel swept a dispassionate look across the others. "Anya could use some help," he noted.

Amused at this unsubtle direction, Spike watched the others fan out into the crowd, then hitched himself onto a crate and let Angel kneel and play doctor. "Could've been worse," he said after a few moments, responding to the unspoken judgment hanging in the air.

Angel hooked his fingers into the bullet hole and ripped Spike's jeans away from the wound, then looked up. "Did I say anything?"

"Hey! You know how hard it is to find jeans on the black market right now? They're like gold, mate."

"Sorry." Angel probed the wound, which had already closed over, before taking the knife from his hip and slicing it open again.

"And don't play like you don't know what I mean," Spike added, mood deteriorating with the death of his favorite Levis. "Go on. Might as well get it out. Unhealthy to repress."

"What do you want me to say? That you shouldn't have gone off half-cocked like Don Quixote to take on an entire demon army single-handed, risking your life against ridiculous odds because you were too impatient to wait or ask for help?"

"Yeah. That." A smile of grudging affection escaped Spike before he could flatten it. Thank Christ Angel wasn't looking up. The other vampire had somehow, even while speaking, managed to compress his own lips down to a grim little line of pique. But his touch with the knife remained incredibly gentle.

"You really piss me off sometimes."

"Sorry, Sancho. Couldn't wait. Had to strike while the iron was hot."

Angel finally looked up, serious and not giving an inch--angry too, Spike could tell, because he was more clam-faced than usual. "The iron was hot yesterday and it'll be hot again tomorrow, Spike. You hit that camp because it was fun."

"Well, yeah," he admitted. "You know me, plucky and adventury." He winced and braced as Angel knifed the bullet loose, but admired the twist of metal when he saw it between the other man's
fingers. "Make a nice earring," he observed. Thwarting his fashion tendencies, Angel pocketed the slug, and Spike sighed. "Not going to start a massive brooding campaign, are you?"

"Would it do any good?" Tight voice of a tightly wound man.

Instead of answering, Spike looked across the room to where the others had taken up tending the refugees. Most of the people were clustered together in segregated groups around the floor, crates and blankets forming makeshift rooms, and he could see a crude social Darwinism already in action, humans angling for better real estate, hoarding the choicer food. Not a lot of demons had joined their exodus, but enough to unsettle things. He wondered how many of the humans he'd liberated had simply taken him for one of their own kind. Most, he'd wager. He'd kept game face to a minimum.

Within the pool of hunched and sleeping bodies, one girl perched cross-legged on a weapons trunk, oblivious to the missile specs and warnings stenciled on its side. She was watching him. Spike caught her eye, assessed her back. No more than twelve but old enough for work camp. Old enough for some graut to take a fancy. He ought not to care. The whole human race started off at a crawl, half of them little girls, and they all came to the same dead end.

Done in by her steady eyes, Spike finally sketched a salute, laying two fingers to his brow. The girl lifted a hand and saluted back, careful to imitate him. With respect for the solemnity of the moment, he nodded and let his gaze move on.

As if directed by an internal compass, it unerringly found Xander. Back half turned, he was opening tins of food with a hand-crank, passing them to Buffy for dispensing. An assembly line of two.

"Could get interesting," Angel said. "Having him back here."

Had he asked for color commentary on his private life? No, he bloody well hadn't. Irritation returning, Spike pushed to his feet. "I don't need an Agony Aunt. Bugger off and find something to do."

Angel delivered a mild "As you wish," with an entirely straight face.

Insufferable git.

"How're things?"

Wiping her hands free of creamed corn, Buffy cocked her head for thought at Spike's question. "Well, this isn't exactly how I imagined my role in the resistance. Also, I thought I'd have one of those kicky berets. But, feeding the hungry, no shame there."

No shame, but when it came to sympathy, it felt like she'd opened a vein. The refugees were in a terrible state--she thought this might even qualify as a plight, the kind of disaster you held red-ribbon fundraisers for. She'd been trying not to look too closely at anyone, afraid she might start
Spike on the other hand was treating her to his patented vampire inspection, eyeballing her clothes and indexing her body mass in a critical way, as if she were a dowdy and underfed minion he was starting to have reservations about.

"Speaking of feeding the hungry," he said. "When's the last time you shoved some carbs in your furnace?"

"Carbs are evil, dangerous, and the enemy of all I stand for," Buffy informed him seriously. "It's my duty to help eradicate them."

"What--no good carbs in your tidy little world? What about soul food then?" He raised his brows while she groaned at the joke. "Doughnuts?"

"Doughnuts only appear harmless. In each creamy center lurks a heart of darkness." Buffy hesitated, then caved. "You don't have happen to have any lying around, do you? Maybe one with sprinkles for me to...eradicate?"

Spike moved his lips in the faintest of smiles. "Wish I did. Not exactly swimming in sweets here, lately."

"So I see." At a momentary loss, she looked around the enormous room, getting her bearings. "This place has changed a lot."

"Well, we tried to keep it homey," Spike said, striking a blithe attitude, then immediately dialing it back down. He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and hooked his thumbs over the edge. "Want the ten-cent tour?"

They circumnavigated the main room, hitting its highlights, then walked down the row of containment cells together. If Buffy counted them off, she could still identify the exact one Spike had been in when they'd rescued him. It gave her a twinge and she thought it must be odd for him too, being back here like this, not that he'd ever show it. He'd long since passed out of the Whining Era and into the Stoic.

Buffy eyed the furnishings rigged up by the kids to make the cells habitable. "This is...kind of sad," she said.

"You're welcome to try for better."

She'd offended him without meaning to, and could hear all the frustration and effort of the last several months in his voice. "I wouldn't know where to begin," she said with honesty, her own voice low.

Her feet drew to a halt in front of a cell with a collage of magazine pages covering the walls and a foot-deep strew of clothes across the floor, the perfect replica of a teenage girl's room relocated a hundred feet underground. It couldn't be Dawn's. Dawn's would have weapons.

"You've done more here than most people could ever hope to achieve--"

"Oh, spare me the watcher's pep talk." Spike sounded unimpressed and testy, and his gaze kept skittering off as if he were embarrassed. He never took praise well, but something else seemed to be on his mind. "Look," he said, finally meeting her eyes. "This is mostly Angel's doing. I just work here."
"Angel?"

"He's the one who saw the writing on the wall, stockpiled all this--" Spike waved a hand. "Kept me in the dark about it too, even before the grauts came along and took the sun out of Sunnydale."

"I don't understand." She tried to match up what he was saying with what Willow had told them in L.A. His moody tone was equally hard to interpret.

"Not sure I do either. You're better off talking to him."

It was no answer, but she didn't press. She studied him as he slumped against the wall. His jeans were spattered with gore and caked with drying filth, his shirt ripped, his hair a mess; he was fiddling with his lighter, obviously jonesing for a cigarette he didn't have on him. He looked tired, and then he looked up at her. No smile, just that old, steady vampire regard that even now could make her twitchy.

"What?" he asked.

His challenge almost tempted a smile from her; he was so true to form that she could almost cite the page number of the watcher's handbook on vampire aggressive behaviors. "Is there anything you need?" she asked. "I mean now, from me?"

Spike looked aside, playing it cool. "You're here," he said with an indifference she recognized as feigned. "Enough for now. You and Angel'll get things sorted. Me, I'll just--"

"Fight the good fight," she finished, giving gravity to the words he always uttered so dryly. She wondered if he was having any doubts; his jaded expression didn't ease her mind and she longed to offer him support. "You are a champion, Spike. I know you like to shrug off the whole destiny thing, but you've more than proved yourself. No one can say you aren't the chosen one--"

But people had tried, and something must have irritated that old sore spot recently, or maybe it was just her long absence that had Spike rolling his eyes and making a yak-yak gesture with one hand. "Yeah, I know the sales pitch." He launched into bored sing-song: "'Into each generation, a vampire slayer is called. One vampire in all the world, a chosen one, granted the strength and skill to hunt his own kind and to stop the spread of evil.' Epic honor, comes with a nice gold cross and no retirement plan."

"Spike, I know it can be hard--"

He uttered a sound just short of a laugh. "What would you know, little girl?" He ran a hand through his hair, looked suddenly even more tired. "You haven't even been here."

The blow hit her where she lived, in the guilty, aching place under her ribs. She'd let him down long before the Grauth came along and ripped all her memories away, but even that felt like her fault. She dropped her gaze. "I'm sorry--"

"Leave it. I don't need a retread of old ground. We've got new battles to fight." He walked off on that reminder and left Buffy alone in the corridor to wonder just how much ground she'd lost with him by pulling out of Sunnydale and whether she could ever get it back.
The general was not happy. Some men when unhappy camouflage the feeling behind protocol and discipline; others have a kind of anger that runs cold rather than hot. General Nilec, a cold man most of the time, boiled hot with unhappiness. His unbuttoned uniform jacket said that he'd been roused from bed with bad news and hadn't yet recovered; since entering his staff room he hadn't sat down at the meeting table. He paced behind his chair, the Imperial State sigil as his backdrop. Whenever he paused he looked like a propaganda poster for the war effort. Naziren suspected he knew that. The general was conscious of his image, even when discomposed.

At the general's next circuit over the parquet tiles, the tall, ornate doors across from him banged open and his chief of operational support hurried in. His coat was buttoned, cloak fastened smartly, cap angled with parade-ground precision on his head. Nilec, who'd paused at the entrance, seemed to be taking notice of this.

"General," said the operations chief, tucking his cap under one arm. "My aide informed me of the incident at the work camp." He wavered at Nilec's unrelenting gaze and swallowed hard enough that the nervous apple bob of his throat was visible from across the room. "We'll double our guards at the other camps until the slayer is caught, sir. We'll--"

Nilec unholstered his pistol. The gesture stopped the other man mid-speech, while the officers seated around the table averted their eyes, shuffling through their official documents with a newly discovered interest. In a single fluid movement, the general reversed the gun and extended it to the operations chief, who took it miserably.

It appeared that a position was opening up on the general's staff. But Naziren was laying no bets on his own promotion, so he took only an impersonal interest. As the doomed officer raised the gun to his temple, he crooked one finger and gestured a footman over.

"Bring me a cup of tea," he said. "Lapsang Souchong."

A shot rang out and the footman nodded, their exchange punctuated by a dull, collapsing thud at the other end of the room.

As the ex-operations chief was discreetly dragged away by junior officers, General Nilec glared at his staff, leaning forward with hands on the table. "I have reached the end of my tolerance for failure," he said in an even voice that suddenly launched into a shout: "Failure is death!" He slammed one hand on the tabletop for emphasis. Unnecessary emphasis, Naziren thought. The garnish of a cheap demagogue, not an Imperial officer.

Straightening, Nilec fixed his gaze on the man seated to his left. "Colonel Liyoge, you are in charge of operations."

Liyoge looked dismayed, but hid it almost at once. "Thank you, General."

That might have been a cue to discuss new organizational plans, but Nilec's temper hadn't yet burned out and he turned it on them again now. "Tonight, rebel forces led by the slayer attacked one of our camps and freed over a hundred prisoners. At the same time, the civil defense barrier was penetrated at the south end of town." Nilec paused while a murmur went around the table at this unexpected news. "The tunnel system is riddled with enemies of the state, and the slayer remains free. An unfortunate lapse on our part. Wouldn't you agree, Colonel Naziren?"

Though he'd expected to be put on the spot, Naziren didn't intend to conclude this meeting by
shooting himself. "The slayer is one man. If our army can't secure the town, I suggest we remedy
that deficit first."

Provoked, the army major general turned a ranking glare on him. "Are you blaming my
command?"

"It isn't the job of Special Forces to compensate for the shortcomings of our troops, Major General
Garon."

"You half-blood dreffa, how dare you--"

"Silence!" Nilec bellowed. "You may well blame each other." He gave them an unpleasant smile.
"As I blame you both. I expect immediate action to secure the tunnels," he cast a look at Garon,
"and to root out the insurgents."

Garon nodded. "Of course, General."

An unsettled, waiting silence fell while Nilec finally took his seat and then scoured Garon with
another glare. "Immediate means now!" As the major general beetle off, Nilec folded his arms on
the table. "Meanwhile, Colonel Naziren will tell us why his department has so far fallen short of
capturing the slayer, and Colonel Liyoge--" The new operations chief nearly jumped. "--will share
his plans for securing the civil defense barrier against any further breaches."

Liyoge and Naziren traded a glance down the table with the shared expression of men vying for
second place in firing squad order. Nilec took the decision from their hands.

"Colonel Naziren."

"Sir?"

"I've been informed that our trophy officer, Captain Rosenberg, knows the slayer...intimately." A
thin smile. "How exactly have you been exploiting this relationship?"

Willow felt Xander's gaze knifing between her shoulder blades. Lifting her head from the rags she
was tearing, she stared straight ahead and pictured him standing there behind her like a mirror or a
shadow. She smiled to herself sourly, resisting a childish urge to turn and stick her tongue out.
That'd be undignified, right? They weren't kids any more. That was the problem. One, anyway. It
had been a long ride to Sunnydale and the success of her mission made her gloomy. She'd escorted
the white knight to his king's side--was she still needed here? Hardly. Anyone could rip bandages.

"I'd forgotten what a good act you put on." He was at her shoulder and she hadn't even heard him
coming.

She hated how easily he provoked her, that she'd been forced to go and collect him for Spike, that
she was forced to look his way now. He stood studying her as if she were something in a jar, like a
tumor that had been cut out of his life. He'd done the cutting, hadn't he. They'd been best friends
since grade school but come high school it all went bad, and it'd had nothing to do with Spike, not then. Magic came between them first. Xander, judgmental and superior—he never had a clue. Always using his fists, too stupid to take what the world offered. Bud White with a grudge, tight-lipped and miserable, doomed by family and alcohol and fear, so afraid of being a faggot he ran out on the only person who'd ever looked twice at him.

Oh well. That'd had worked out nice for her.

"You've got Spike wrapped around your little finger, don't you," he went on, tilting his head and quirking a half smile. "Miss Peaches and Cream." He sounded normal, even mild, his hostility so readily on tap he didn't have to strain.

She felt naked and mouselike without her magic. He could rip into her any time he wanted to, and she'd be helpless to all that throwback male power. But she smiled back sunnily.

"Behind every great man is a great woman. But you had trouble filling that position, didn't you?"

"Do you think you're anything more than a temp?"

Willow lost her smile. "Every day, when he needs me—I'm here. And I'll be here five years from now, and fifty, when you're just a handful of worms in the ground. And one day he'll forget you, just like that," she snapped her fingers and threw away a handful of nothingness, "and I'll still be here."

Xander took a step closer, no longer bothering to hide the coldness behind his eyes. "If you ever mess with his head, I will break you."

"I don't need to take away what's already gone."

Tossing away the bandages, Willow cut through the crowd as best she could, every necessary sidestep abrading her patience. Bodies everywhere. It was like a meat locker. An unpleasantly warm one, where the meat was turning.

"Going somewhere, Red?"

His voice always sent a thrill through her, right down to her toes, even when she was grumpy or reluctant or contemplating how he'd look as a frog. She let Spike take her hand; he used it to revolve her gracefully in a dance step that brought her into the curve of his arm, then guided her into the east wing corridor toward the old bunk rooms. Pressed against his muscled side she felt light and clingy as a feather; it was tempting to just go boneless and let the glide of his body carry her along. Masculine strength wasn't so scary when it was his.

"Didja have a good time tonight?" she asked, chipper girlishness surfacing from the burial ground of her old self. "You're all juiced up, aren't you?"

He didn't answer but the look he gave her was appropriately smoldering, and she could sense a thrum of excess energy below the surface of his skin that fighting hadn't released. He pushed open a door with his hip, whirled her through, and lifted her up, all so quickly it took her breath away, but she didn't hesitate to wrap her arms and legs around him like one of those little clip-on koalas, and whatever happened to those, anyway?

They were in one of the base bathrooms, all pale-green tile and flickering strip lights, and he settled her ass on a sink and began taking off her jeans with determination while she sat and grinned, wriggling but letting him do the work. His hunger was reassuring. She was the one he wanted. She understood him better than anyone, his darkness and power, his moods and needs. When he thrust
inside she was already wetly aching, and she cried out and slipped off the sink, but he caught and held her.

"Did you miss me?" she asked, hoping the huskiness of her voice made the question less pathetic.

"What do you think?" He was smiling, his doting expression out of synch with the rough movements of his hips in a way that excited her.

"You missed me." Giddy and happy, she let her eyes close and head fell back, setting her hair to swinging. "And you're all bloody and dirty and you--you couldn't wait--"

"You like bloody and dirty." He slammed into her hard with the words.

"I do. Oh!" There it was, uplifting, exploding, and a little meow of bliss might have escaped before she sighed, "I do."

He ran a thumb along her cheek, kissed her. "Trip all right?" He was pulling away, zipping up even before she'd stopped pulsing, and she wished he'd slow down a little, eat her out once or twice, but maybe now wasn't the best time.

"What do you think?" she rejoined dryly, tugging up her jeans. "I went, I got your boy, I came trotting back. Do I get a cookie? Or just the--"

"Don't call him that."

It was like a ruler rap to her knuckles, flat and sharp and hard. Throat a little tighter, she tossed her hair and checked her make-up in the mirror, biding her time until he turned her around, firm hands on her waist.

"Don't be sulky." His voice had gentled again, reproving but indulgent.

"I'm not. I just--"

"You're just a bad little girl," he said knowingly, "full of evil thoughts, hankering, greedy as a tot in a sweet shop. Want to chew up the whole world, spit out what you can't swallow. You're like me." His words and smile thrilled her, and his touch wandered, mapping her neck and the good place behind her ear. "They've got us both in the collar." His gaze dipped a moment and she could see bitterness in the shape of his mouth. "Wish I could change that. Power you up and god--these bastards wouldn't even know what hit 'em."

"I'd wipe them clean off the earth," she said with earnestness. "Melt them and pour them back into their hell-hole and plug it up forever."

"I know it, love."

She smiled up at him wistfully, and he smiled down, and they didn't have to say anything else, because they got each other. When he looked at her like this, nothing else mattered. It was all good.
Willow caught Xander's eye immediately as she returned to the main room--he'd been watching the door, how sad--and made a show of smoothing her sweater before giving him a tiny finger-waggling wave. He turned away.

Just before she reached the exit, Dawn moved to block her path. "Where are you going?"

Awww, thought Willow. It was kind of adorable, that puffed-up, kittenish attempt at authority. Even with a Bowie knife sheathed on her hip and a gun in one steady hand, the girl looked about fourteen and not exactly scary.

"Back to my comfy bed, roaring fire, and Chablis."

Dawn regarded her coolly. "Ever think of sharing the wealth?"

"Not really, no."

Hefting her gun a notch, Dawn considered Willow from head to toe in a deliberate way. "You know, take away those magic glamours and the fancy uniform, and you really are kinda short and shabby."

She smiled and Willow bit her tongue and smiled back, regretting her inability to cast hexes. Never smart to let the brat rattle her. And besides--

"Didn't you need a favor from me?"

Dawn's smugness vanished with satisfying speed. "Yes. And I'm coming with you. No comfy bed for us until my parents are back in theirs."

With a few measured steps, Willow entered Dawn's personal space and trailed one painted nail along the barrel of her semi-automatic. It twitched like interested flesh. "I thought you were just kidding about the sex, but if you're feeling keen--"

"You to your comfy bed," Dawn clarified snappishly. "Me to my sleeping bag. Or, I mean--to Tara's. But no sex!"

Willow put on her pity face. "Lesbian bed death already? That's a shame. I can see why you're both so worked up."

Teeth were gritted. "No sex between you and me."

"Yes," Tara said, popping out of a nearby nowhere and giving Willow a surly look. She folded her arms and moved into Dawn's orbit like a soft, moon-faced satellite. "No sex," she repeated as if Willow were a schoolgirl needing lessons drummed in. "No cuddling either. And none of those sultry bath scenes where you have to clean each other's wounds and the mirror gets all steamy and--" She broke off, cheeks pink, and let her hair curtain her face.

"Okay, baby." Dawn looked ready to cut the conversation short with her Bowie. "I think we're all clear."

"Kinda insecure, aren't you?" Willow said to Tara with a bright, faux interest.

"Some people find that charming," she retorted, lifting her chin again, defiant despite her blush.

"Good for you," Willow said. "You keep telling yourself that." Circling around them, she headed
out the exit. "If you're coming, come," she called back to Dawn.

"Be careful," Tara murmured, once the other witch had passed out of hearing range. There was worry in her face and a hunch to her shoulders that made Dawn feel protective, as if she were the older one instead of the younger.

"I'll be more than careful," she said, and gave Tara a tender peck on the lips. "I'll be safe."

A low boom broke somewhere underground, distant enough that it might have been mistaken for a piece of machinery kicking on--ventilation, say--but strong enough to shiver the mirror over the sink and ripple the water where Spike was washing up. He rested his hands on either side of the porcelain, watching till the shockwave subsided, then let the water drain, carrying away the blood and grit he'd rubbed from his skin. Nails edged black, for want of a nail file--well, no great loss. Hair could do with another rinse, probably looked like a bleached hedgehog, spines sticking out all over, but he couldn't be arsed.

"Is that normal?" Xander asked.

Spike looked up to see the other man's face in the mirror where his own should have been. Disorienting, the tricks mirrors played. Made him feel insubstantial despite the weight of years.

"No." He turned. "They're blasting the tunnels. Figured they would, sooner or later."

"At least it wasn't close."

"How far you make that?"

"Couple of miles--maybe more. Big blast, though."

"Probably the tunnel entrance near the camp."

They looked at each other for a few moments, and it seemed like Xander realized at the same time he did that they didn't have much to say. Or too much--so much that all they could gab about was what passed for business. In a minute or two they'd have to get on with it, figure out their next move. But neither of them seemed inclined.

Spike plucked his shirt from an adjacent sink, shook it out for a critical squint, sniffed it, then tossed it back as a bad catch. Settled his weight against the cold porcelain. Fingered the tear in his jeans. Xander shifted to lean against a stall and said a lengthening nothing, leaving it to Spike to speak again first.

"How's L.A. then?"

"Smoggy, temperatures ranging in the mid-sixties, zealots trying to raise a demon queen, and this small talk really bites."

Spike ducked his head a little and uncurled a wry smile of acknowledgment. "Yeah." A pause, and
then his voice lowered on its own, as if there were intimacy to be had. "You worried about your parents--being in the ghettos?"

"What parents?" Xander was expressionless. "I don't have parents. Dawn has parents. I have memories of crazy drunks who tied me to a tree during happy hour. That whole sobriety-and-religion thing, that was the post-Xander era. So they fostered a kid. Big deal. You think that's from guilt?" Intense eyes held Spike's, dark as the well of history. "That's not guilt. That's disappointment. When your car breaks down, you don't fix it. You buy the new model."

Suppressed anger poured off Xander and its heat lit a strange, answering glow inside Spike. He'd missed that fire. Missed the fireside.

"They've been good to her," he was obliged to say. What he didn't say was how he'd made sure of it.

"I'm sure they'll get a nice plaque in hell. 'Best Mom and Dad, Second Time Around.'"

His voice held an edge sharp enough for a clean shave or a cut throat, and Spike wanted to comfort him, but he couldn't remember how. His gaze wandered across Xander from boots to hips, from fidgeting hands to wide shoulders, until he caught himself at it, made himself look up, found Xander watching him, hawkish and hungry. It sent Spike zero to sixty in record time, a rush of blood to his prick and longing to his heart. But the memory of rejection kept his muscles locked in place; he was a dog trained to heel and wait for a permissive word.

When one didn't come, the old anger bit deep. Only difference now was, he'd already done his best and his worst, teased Xander and punished him, and the only success he'd had was driving him away. His anger was tired.

"Suppose we'd better..." he said, pushing off from the sink.

"I'm not happy," Xander said out of the blue, and it made Spike stop, take a closer look at the shadowed eyes, unshaven jaw, fringe hanging all in his face like some grunge guitarist's. "I hate L.A. Hate fighting a losing battle, watching my friends get taken apart piece by piece, a little here, a little there." His voice was flat, matter of fact. "And I hate knowing you're ninety miles north playing footsie with Willow and I was stupid enough to leave you."

Dark eyes burned into his and Spike went still, trying to work through what he meant from what little he'd said. "We playing true confessions? Or's there some point to this?"

Xander shook his head. "No point." A small crack of a laugh. "None."

"You just trying to wind me up then?" Spike's face tightened. "'Cause I don't have time for your mea culpas, pet. You know I can't bloody think when you--" A hand came out to touch his trace along his jaw, cutting off the flow of words. It hurt. His scalpel-fingered boy.

"I'm not taking all the blame. I wanted to be your friend."

"And you are." Spike struggled against sarcasm, kept his voice even. The words weren't untrue, but he could have made them sound that way, oh so easily. Half his waking existence was spent mastering his own cruel bent--the other half trying to remember why the hell he even had to. Joys of being a slayer.

Another boom reverberated quietly through the walls and they both cocked their heads, listening, measuring, using the distraction to evade each other's eyes. Then they left the bath and headed for the Initiative core. On the way Spike grabbed another shirt, still buttoning it as they entered the
"Angel!" he shouted. From the sleeping pallets, a few heads lifted, but most people were either wholly awake or soundly asleep, unmoved by explosions or noisy vampires. Spike and Xander maneuvered through the bodies to meet Angel in the middle of the room, Anya and Buffy joining them.

"You heard it too?" Angel asked.

"That last one was closer." Spike looked around the room, contemplating both the structure and the array of guests. "Should be safe here. We're under the campus," a glance up, "under their bloody club. Can't see them bringing the blitz here."

Anya hugged herself lightly, as if feeling for holes in the elbows of her sweater. "If they don't know where we are, then what're they doing?"

"Closing off access routes," Xander said, glancing at Spike. "Trying to control our movements, drive us toward whatever they've left open--that's where they'll be waiting."

"They're working blind." Angel sounded certain of this, daddy vamp calming the kiddies at bedtime, and Spike was as ready to be reassured as any of them. "It's just retaliatory action. Whoever's in charge is saving his own...head." He'd clearly had another word in mind but edited it for Anya's sake. He went to the big table, the rest of them following, and pulled a rolled map from a nearby box. They cleared off dinner plates so he could spread it out and then studied it together. The map covered the entire surface and showed the town's sanitation and utility tunnel systems; routes had been marked with highlighters and cramped notes filled the margins.

"How up-to-date is this?" Buffy wondered.

Spike flattened the creased paper with one palm. "Map's about five years old, but not far off, least when it comes to municipal works. Gagworm burrows not shown, of course."

"Of course."

"Green's the tunnels we've been using," Spike said, pointing out a stretch that led from the area of Initiative to the town center. "Anything we know's open. Yellow for caution zones--still plenty of demons lurking around who can't abide fresh air, make it hard to pass."

"Orange for closed tunnels," Xander finished with a guess confirmed by Spike's nod. "So all this unmarked area," he brushed his fingers across a patch of map, "hasn't even been scouted?"

"Well," Spike said in a neutral tone, "we've been short of warm bodies until now." A glance at Angel. "Cold ones too for that matter." He thought he'd concealed his defensiveness, but a look at Xander told him otherwise.

"That's right," Anya said, sounding more perky than the rest of them combined. She cast her appraising eye over the sleeping refugees. "But when these slugs wake up, we can put them to work!"

Perky should be classified as a controlled substance, Spike decided--though a hit of that about now wouldn't go amiss. The other humans were starting to wilt and he didn't feel so apple-fresh himself.

"Night's rest'll do us all good," he said, tugging the map toward him and rolling it up bit by bit under his hands.
His words sent them drifting off in search of their resting places, all except Angel, who stood by with that watchdog loyalty which sometimes triggered Spike's temper but just as often disarmed it. A baffling old bastard, his grandsire. A soul had lamed him long ago--gypsies, curse, wet blanket, tragic--but having a slayer in the family had turned him downright cuddly, at least after a few years of tough love and prize fights smoothed their reunion. Good thing he had no soul of his own, they'd probably be swapping Hallmarks and stuffed teddies by this point. Hard to admit, but without Angel he'd have gone round the bend fast in this gig.

Of course, even after all the negotiation and compromise, shared battles and bottles, he got flashes of the old Angelus. Bones had a long memory for pain. But it was the bleed of his heart that kept Spike up most nights. And it wasn't Angelus who'd sunk his fangs there.

"You okay?" Angel asked quietly.

Spike could pick out Xander's heartbeat from a hundred, hear him breathing across a crowded room.

He raised his head, impassive and perfectly schooled. "Never better."

"A slayer at large," Liyoge said, following Naziren through the main hall. "Rebels attacking the camps. And your witch mysteriously shaking every agent set to tail her." He sucked air between his teeth in vague commiseration. "A difficult time for you, Naz." On the front steps, he gloved himself against the cold and adjusted his cap while waiting for the car to be brought around. The wind blew up the corners of their coats and snapped the flags that hung from the facade. It was snowing again.

Naziren glanced up into a darkness blurred by countless flakes as if he had definite opinions on the snow. "You recruited the good captain."

"Dear Will. A pretty and promising young woman." He'd always liked the dangerous type. "But I was only acting on the recommendation of field agents."

"I think the general has made it clear we share responsibility, Operations Chief Liyoge."

Liyoge grimaced and avoided his look.

A car pulled up to the curb and Naziren turned to him. "Can I offer you a lift?"

"I'm expecting my own--"

Naziren gripped the back of his neck and dashed him against the car, then shoved him through the rear door obligingly opened by the chauffeur. "Let me give you a lift," he said, climbing in behind.

"You mad bastard." Liyoge sagged in disarray while Naziren took the opposite seat. Disbelief and outrage filled him with a sensation like too much air in the lungs, and he made a show of touching a handkerchief to his bloodied nose. "I could have you up on charges."
"We've achieved mutually assured destruction, then. My operatives have amassed quite a file on you." He drew a folder from a case on the seat and flipped through its pages. "Gambling, drugs, loose women--" He paused on a photo Liyoge couldn't make out, tilted it, then dropped it back and let the file fall shut. "What boring vices you have. But still quite illegal, at least the way you practice them. Make yourself a drink and stop twittering."

Liyoge lowered his handkerchief from his face and obeyed, choosing a decanter from the drink caddy and pouring himself a double measure. He'd heard all the stories about the other man--who hadn't?--but had never personally seen his bad side before now. Damned dirty pool, this attack. He found himself taking an inventory of his interactions with Naziren, but couldn't fault himself on any point--he'd done nothing to deserve this.

A thump of heavy artillery resonated through the car, making it shake and jerk as the driver lost and then regained control of the wheel.

"Garon will blast the town from under our feet," Naziren said. "The fool. But we," he grabbed Liyoge's gaze with his own, "need to think more strategically."

"Strategically," Liyoge repeated, unsure what the other man was getting at.

"Cooperatively."

"I recall cooperating with your car a few moments ago." Liyoge brushed a few fingers down the side of his nose. "It was painful."

Naziren withdrew the accoutements of his gentleman status, a silver cigarette case and lighter that he handled with the delicate care one might use to set the ignition on a bomb. "Sharp sudden blows help clear the mind. My father taught me that. So let's see if we can reach an accord, shall we?"

"Go on," Liyoge said warily, pouring a fresh glass of something decadent, amber, and human-concocted and making a mental note to requisition the brand for himself.

"I've had agents shadowing Rosenberg for weeks, hoping to get a lead on the slayer's whereabouts. She always gives them the slip."

"But you have intel--that she's seeing the slayer?"

"A hunch."

Liyoge frowned. Ruses and intrigue were not his métier, but he was beginning to sense a larger design. "Why was I told to recruit the witch? To catch a vampire?"

"Oh, we thought the slayer dead." The half-breed had such a smooth tongue that even a probable truth sounded like a lie. "But the captain is a tool with many uses. As are you, Liyoge."

Little point in taking offense. He eyed the leather case that held his folder and wondered what it would take to ransom it. "What do you want?"

"You're chief of operations now, responsible for the defense shield, the camps. I need to bring Rosenberg in for questioning, but I don't want to sacrifice my relationship with her for short-term gain. She knows you. You'll lead the interrogation."

"So I'm to be, as the humans say, bad cop." Was that really all the other man was asking of him? "No problem," he said, crafting a sudden capitulation that was both brisk and easy. "You only had to ask." He added the last note almost as an afterthought, with a touch of malice. Let Naziren think
he'd wasted his ammunition for a trifle.

"Did I? Well." A smile lifted Naziren's mouth. "I'll remember that."

Liyoge felt the level of his spirits sink again. Best top them off, he thought in resignation, and reached for the decanter.

Dawn had liked Willow once, back when she was younger and more easily impressed by her big sister's friends; when everything they did seemed cool because they were older. Bronzing it to hear bands; wearing sneakers with tassels; listening to cheap indie CDs; carrying hefty textbooks with highlighted pages. When Dawn had chosen to move to Sunnydale as one of the "Summers women" instead of staying in L.A. with her dad (like everything, just another brick in her monastery of false memory) she'd been eager for anyone's attention. Willow had been nice to her then, a fellow geek who loved chess and chemistry and who actually looked at her when Buffy didn't. In return Dawn had crushed hard, charmed by the fuzzy sweaters and friendly smiles, the how's-school-going-Dawnie? questions that seemed to hold real interest, even when asked in passing.

Too bad she'd turned out to be a power-mad bitch with a taste for pyrotechnics and a careless habit of putting her friends in danger.

Willow's Reich-sponsored accommodations were even more opulent than Dawn had expected.

"You have got to be kidding me," she said as the doorman tipped his hat and gave them entry into the hotel. In jeans and a sweater, Willow still swept through the lobby with the panache of a movie star returning from a premiere, earning nods from the staff and discreet glances and whispers from several lounging guests. Her red hair picked up the rich, golden light of the interior, a fiery torch carried by the arrogant lift of her head. She walked like one of them now, Dawn noticed. The enemy.

The walls rose high, curving into a vaulted ceiling from which dangled a crystal chandelier big enough to crush a basketball team or two. In the lobby center a fountain played, and date palms strained upward around the room, fronds making their own chandeliers. There was a lot of marble underfoot. For some reason Dawn thought of the Marx Brothers.

Having developed a slight case of tourist gawk, she nearly bumped into Willow, who'd paused at the front desk.

"Your messages," the clerk said, passing over several creamy envelopes with wax seals. Not a cable bill or pizza flyer among them.

They continued to the elevators, neither of them noticing how the clerk picked up the phone to make a call as soon as they'd moved on.

"Oh hey," Willow said as they waited for the elevator. "The Sunnydale Opera is opening the new season with Madame Butterfly." Her affected tone fell just short of boredom, but then she looked up from the invitation with heavily lidded eyes and a roguish smile. "Do you think I should ask
Spike? I could sneak him into the box with me. I've got this new red dress--well, more cleavage than dress, really."

"You want to put his life in danger for a dress?"

"The question is, does he."

Dawn flicked a gaze at Willow's chest. "I'm thinking, with your cleavage, you should probably just bring him back a program."

"I'm thinking you're going to make someone a nice pet monkey one day."

"If you get your powers back?"

Willow's smile was no smile at all. "When, sweetie. When."

"Oh, right, shaking in my boots now," Dawn said, stepping into the elevator. They stood next to each other at a measured distance, both looking straight ahead as the reflective door closed with a ping. "I'm completely cowed." She paused and lowered her voice to a snark. "Cow."

"You said something earlier--how did that go? 'You do this favor for me, and I will do anything for you.'" Willow quoted the words in a breathy falsetto, not deigning to look at her.

Waltzy elevator music filled the small space from a bad speaker. Dawn curled her fingers and forced herself to breathe toward calm instead of reaching for her gun. "I'm not happy asking favors," she said, treading a middle ground between curt and apologetic.

"Especially of me," Willow noted, sounding strangely normal and sad for a moment, as if they were still on friendly terms and this was just a blip in that friendship. It made Dawn's throat tighten and she became aware of how tired she was. Years and years of tired. She wasn't old enough to be this tired.

"I trust you only as far as Spike does," she said.

"Then you should relax, shouldn't you?" Moment over.

The elevator slid to a stop and within a few steps they were at the door to Willow's suite, which opened on its own--or so Dawn thought until she passed the threshold and saw a red-furred demon in a servant's uniform effacing himself against the wall. Crossing the foyer, Willow shed shoes and jacket, then drew off her sweater and tossed it aside. The red demon buttled after her discards, straightening in time to catch the sweater in his face. It snagged one horn and dangled. He didn't change expression.

Willow, her back a stripped canvas of milky white skin, vanished into the main suite with the command, "Bring me a White Russian, Benny."

After a moment's scrutiny of the foyer--grandfather clock, statuary, ornate lamps on marble tables--Dawn gave a hrmmpf and followed, boots clomping on the glossy checkerboard tiles. She ignored the sitting room and the temptation of its crackling fire, stepped over a crumple of jeans, and trailed Willow into what turned out to be her bedroom. Empty bedroom. Frowning, Dawn moved further inside, then stopped in front of an oil painting of reclining women in gauzy gowns, one holding a book of poetry. She guessed it was poetry because the other women looked half asleep. It snagged one horn and dangled. He didn't change expression.

Willow, her back a stripped canvas of milky white skin, vanished into the main suite with the command, "Bring me a White Russian, Benny."

"Girly," she commented to herself, turning to inspect the rest of the room, which was less so. Masculine paneling and wood tones, a bed with dark red canopies that looked Oriental in style, red
leather chair, wardrobe, dresser, long mirror. Books.

A steady spattering sound drew her to a nearby door and she glanced through to see the shape of Willow’s body behind steam-clouded glass.

"No sultry bath scenes," Dawn murmured.

Reminder in place, she backpedaled and bumped into a table. A silver tray bearing several letters caught her interest. She didn't hesitate to pick through them and read the elegantly scrawled cards in a casual search for evidence. Evidence of what didn't matter. Political treachery, some romantic liaison behind Spike's back--both equally unlikely if she wanted to be honest, and that should have made her glad, right? Because she needed the witch. Needed to trust her.

As far as Spike does.

For now.

"Dearest Willow," she pretended to read, "Thank you for that lovely night in the ammo dump as we made love on the shell casings of our spent passion. I hope your rash has cleared up. Until next time, my darling little eel. Love, General Nilec."

She chucked the card down, picked up another, this one an invitation to a masked ball. "Ten thousand turgrik in unmarked bills is waiting for you under the bridge--come at midnight--come alone. The Reich thanks you for your betrayal of the human race and hopes you'll shop with us again soon."

A soft voice slithered over her left shoulder: "What are you doing?"

Dawn jumped and dashed the rest of the letters back on their tray. "Nothing!"

"Wishful thinking will get you nowhere, Dawnie. We're fresh out of vengeance demons." Smiling in a smackable way, Willow sauntered over to her wardrobe and dropped her towel.

"Will you please stop being naked in front of me?" Dawn asked testily.

"That line only works when we're not in my bedroom. Speaking of which--"

"I'll be in the other room. Try not to take too long with the fetishwear."

She brushed by the butler as he entered with Willow's drink on a tray. The butler bowed his head and continued into the room, offering his mistress the cocktail. She waved it off though, and he set the tray on the dresser and helped her into her uniform jacket.

Willow admired her reflection, running both hands down her tunic from breasts to hips. "Just look at me, dressed up and somewhere to go. Pay me a compliment, Benny."

"The very air is intoxicated by your presence, miss, and the stars out-dazzled by your eyes."

"Ooh! Pretty. I concur."

With a whirl and a hum she returned to the outer room, coming to a stop when she found Dawn standing in the middle of the rug, hands raised and expression tense.

"Captain Rosenberg--"

She was whipping up her pistol before the words even registered, but a hand clamped around her
wrist from one side, and a second, even meatier hand fell on her shoulder from the other. "Ow," she protested weakly as the gun was taken away, trying on a pout while calculating the exact angle she'd need to connect knee to balls.

"Easy, Captain. No need for a fuss." The guardsman who'd unarm her stepped back. "We're just here to escort you to headquarters."

"Glad to see I'm not the only one disobeying orders."

Angel glanced up as Buffy sat down across the table from him. She'd found a hooded sweat somewhere, plain grey, three sizes too big. Wisps of hair escaped her ponytail as if loosened by exertion and not simply carelessness; ivy-fine tendrils a man might twist with his finger or sketch with a pencil. And he could have sketched her any way he wanted her, wicked or ethereal or nakedly ripe, but she'd only be those things on paper. Without his influence, she was just herself, kind and wholesome. All she needed was a silver whistle and she'd be Coach Summers again, a ridiculously young watcher trying to keep her reckless star player in the game.

"I don't need much sleep," he said.

"I seem to have the opposite of jet-lag. Jet-speed, it feels like." She cracked her neck and then ran her gaze over the tools and scraps covering the table. "Still the Renaissance man, I see."

"I was born too late for that. I'm getting nowhere."

Buffy looked at the wynariver he held. "Don't say that. I think it's a great...eggbeater-pinwheel-flashlight thingy. It's got all those gears and widgets and it's very shiny."

He tossed it in the middle of the table, crash-landing it on a tin of screws that scattered with the impact. A childish gesture, and why not; his emotions felt as small and useless as the cogwheels he'd been tinkering with. Buffy might decide to blame herself for his grouchiness, and he almost apologized to pre-empt any misunderstanding. But the baser part of himself wanted to be annoyed with her, a nice change of pace from the weeks he'd spent annoyed with himself.

Buffy picked the device up and turned it around in her hands, poking polished fingernails into its crevices. "Wait," she said, "this isn't supposed to explode, is it?"

"At this point, anything would make me happy. Imperfectly happy. Glad...dened." He paused, then leaned forward, arms resting in front of him. "It's a model of a device that neutralizes magic. They're all over town now. Our spells are useless."

"Oh, Willow mentioned this--a wine, wine-river?"

"Wynariver. Once I have a working model, I can figure out how to disable them."

"Can't you just--"
"No."

She frowned, then brightened. "Oh, hey, what if you--"

"We tried that."

Studying the item, she asked, "It's a magical device, right?" He nodded. "So how are you supposed to get it working without magic? Isn't that like a Catch-22?"

"It jams mystical frequencies." Angel turned the sheaf of blueprints so that she could see the henscratch of demon languages bordering the design. "But if you have the key--"

"You could tap in. So what's the key?"

"A spell. Here." He tapped the script with one finger. "That's not the problem. This is."

Looking at the new spot he indicated, she bent her head closer. "A crystal. That's it? That's all you need?"

Stung by the skepticism in her voice, he shifted back in his seat, the pleasure of collaboration cooling. "It's not labeled. I've tried everything, every stone with occult properties."

"Except whatever works." At his level gaze, she added haltingly, "And I'm being State-the-Obvious Girl. Right." A pause for thought, lashes lowering. "It has to be one people don't normally think to use. Something expensive and hard to get, like--"

"Rubies or sapphires," Angel finished, as it all fell together for him. It was just that obvious and sudden, a lightning strike fusing a dozen loose fragments together into something he could see and understand from all sides. "Mount Sillyik." He read the confusion on her face and explained, "The Grauth are mining there for gems."

"A ruby would have more power," she said, matching his own thoughts. "But, god." She picked up the wynariver, found the spot for the crystal and measured it between two fingers. "It'd have to be big."

"Maybe not. Not for just a model. Damn it! I should have thought of this--" On my own, he mentally finished, compressing his lips before he could hurt her. He felt like a fool. It smarted.

"You would have."

"Anya has a ring," he remembered, ignoring her attempt at reassurance. "Ruby's her birthstone."

"And you think she'll give it to you?" Buffy's brows rose. "Anya?"

They both looked over to where the ex-demon lay curled under a blanket, twitching with dog dreams, then Angel glanced back at Buffy. "She's sleeping. I'm stealthy." He got up.

"Watch the fangs."

"I'm not going to bite her," he said, wondering if he should be affronted.

"I meant hers."

Angel knelt next to Anya. Her face was turned halfway into her pillow, mashed and obscured by curls. Wheezing sighs and mutters filtered out from behind the veil. One arm was thrust under the pillow, hand curled up behind it like a dead spider; the other hand, the one he wanted, rested on the
He lifted it and held it with care, then slid the ring off.

"Bees!" she gasped, tearing her hand away and swatting at the hair in her face. "Bees, bees, bees!"

He froze, resting on his haunches and holding the ring, but after a few seconds she groaned a sleepy complaint and shifted, burrowing further into the pillow. When her regular sighs resumed he withdrew, feeling like a hero who'd robbed a dragon's lair. Buffy mimed a cheerleader's hurrah.

It didn't take long to pry loose the stone and adjust the gauge of the wynariver to accept it. This was the kind of moment for a deep breath, but instead he met Buffy's eyes briefly, contemplating how dumb he'd look if this didn't succeed.

"You know," she said, tipping her head in a thoughtful way, "I've missed working with you like this."

"Me too," he said quietly. He smiled just long enough to feel warm and awkward, then read the spell from the plans. "Saddai citu menste, nyin Sytos, nyin Mitrev, cad riddin, wyr gleh."

The filaments around the crystal glowed and spread out along the arms of the machine until they reached the encircling discs, which began to turn. Levers and wheels shifted and brought to life a blue, helical core. The whole thing hummed and balanced on a single spindle, like a top.

"You did it," Buffy said, grinning like sunshine at him and looking as if she might clap her hands. "It's spinning and glowing and okay, what's it doing?"

"What they all do. Inhibiting magic."

"Oh. Well, that's...kind of anticlimactic, actually."

Buoyant with success, Angel almost allowed himself another smile. "But now I can test my theory." Careful not to jostle the wynariver's balancing act, he lifted one of the outer discs and slowly realigned it from north to south. "If this works, we should be able to--"

The disc settled into place and a bubble of electrified air expanded in an incalculable instant, ripping through them like a shockwave from a tiny exploding star. Nearby, Anya grew agitated, face pulling tight, eyes moving beneath the lids, while a few pallets over, Xander rolled in her direction, reaching out in sleep toward her. In one of the Initiative cells, Spike shifted restlessly on his mattress, kicked the blanket lower, and murmured, "Buffy." In the back seat of a limo rolling across town, Willow's eyes suddenly went wide. Across from her Dawn jerked upright, panicked. "What's happening? What--" But Willow shook her head; the Grauth guards sat too close and were frowning at the outburst.

In the Initiative, Angel shuddered and stared at Buffy, seeing her. Seeing her. She stared back with the same illumination and dazed wonder. For the second time that night Angel's memory woke, shifting him from the unreal to the real with jarring abruptness. He'd forgotten her and remembered and forgotten again, and now with a surge of emotion he took her hand, desperate to keep hold of her this time, like a man grabbing for help as he drowned. He was only a man because he loved her. If he forgot her, he forgot himself. He forgot everything.

"Buffy."

"Angel!" Bewilderment and fear merged in her expression, gave her urgency. "What's happening? I wasn't me and you weren't you--"

"I know."
"It's crazy--" Her face changed to dismay. "Oh my god. Spike's me--the slayer me. Spike. Spike!" She sounded as if she'd just caught him wearing her panties and tap dancing on a table, and Angel felt the wrongness just as keenly. "We have got to fix this, this--this whatever! Now!"

"It's me," he said, his gut a twist of guilt. "I'm unstable--there are these dimensional shifts--" His thoughts jumbled together and he wondered how to explain the last six weeks quickly in a way that would make sense to someone who hadn't been there. He wished Wes were around. "We've been fighting a sorcerer. Harkness. He used to be a physicist. He wants to raise a demon, something that shouldn't exist in our dimension. He's channeling powers that go beyond magic. He's messing with the fabric of the universe. I got in the way."

"God," she said, and he could tell her thoughts had been running on a separate track. "I can remember being in England, at council headquarters--getting your letter, flying out here to see Xander. It's like a whole separate life. This freaky clone-Buffy. But Harkness--Xander told me something about him, but I don't--I don't understand."

"I don't either. But I change things. Except I don't--things change around me. I can't stop it. Fred's been working non-stop but she can't figure it out." He didn't say how very much that scared him. "She and Wes put a spell on me to keep it under control. I thought it would hold."

"So the wynarivers were suppressing the spell's magic, but when we reversed the polarity--"

"That's not exactly--never mind. Yes."

"The spell was restored. And we were us again. The right usses." Buffy looked at the device, pulled her hand from his and reached out as if to touch it, then stopped. "We have to let the others know. And we can't let this--"

Something blew and the wynariver spun and wobbled in erratic, widening circles. Angel braced against a feeling of being sucked into a windtunnel and shielded his face as gears popped loose. A spiral of energy flared white for one long sustained moment, then winked out.

Back across town, Willow was surreptitiously edging a hand toward the gun of the guard next to her. In disoriented fear she shut her eyes, but by the time she opened them again she felt just fine. "Huh," she said. "Did you guys feel that? Like a big champagne bubble popping in your head?" Dawn looked pointedly away without answering.

Cautiously Angel lowered his arms. Minuscule fragments of ruby littered the table, along with some not-so-spare parts he'd spent weeks collecting. The wynariver lay on its side, metal arms darkened and twisted as if burnt.

"That was..." Buffy paused for a long time but didn't finish her sentence.

"Weird," Angel finally said, blinking.

"I guess we need a bigger ruby."

"Did you," he began, then halted. They looked at each other searchingly.

"I was going to ask you," Buffy said. "If you felt--I thought I remembered something." She bent her head and touched the side of her neck, eyes unfocused. "A dream I once had--where I knew you. Except, not like this. Different." The words stumbled out of her.

"I felt it." He wasn't sure what else to say.
Looking uncomfortable, Buffy seemed just as eager to let the issue go. "Can you fix this?" she asked, running a hand across the debris.

"I think so. We'll have to find another stone."

"Two." At his questioning look, she smiled wryly. "One for the wynariver, one to keep Anya from throttling us." She got up, brushed dust from her top. "I'll let Spike know."

She took a few steps away, then turned. "Maybe we should let him sleep a little bit longer."

Angel paused, and his mind reached for something but didn't find it. "Good idea," he said, taking up work again. "Even heroes need rest."

Willow lounged against the wooden chair like a showgirl posing between dance moves, legs splayed, one arm draped over the back. It didn't seem possible for a body to be that supple or obscene when fully clothed, but the clinging uniform and polished boots were just the snakeskin of the snake. Under the bare-bulbed lamp dangling above her head she looked sharp and garishly painted, the cover of a pulp novel. Black leather, red lipstick, ivory skin. Give her a bullwhip and she'd never lack for clients.

"I'm cooperating, aren't I?" She made an appealing face at the men, her smile suggesting that she was happy to find herself in their custody. "There's no reason for the girl to be here."

One of the Grauths--the one Willow had addressed as Naziren--shifted to look at Dawn. She shrank in on herself, lowering her eyes and trying to appear scared and unimportant. It wasn't hard. They'd taken her gun and her knife.

The other one spoke, his voice fluting and posh for a demon. "She's a snitch?" He came closer and tilted Dawn's face up for a better view. "Rather young."

"Our culture worships youth," Willow replied dryly.

"Dawn," the Grauth said, drawing her name out.

From the corner of her eye, Dawn saw Willow's face take on guarded calculation, then smooth out again. The loose splay of her body seemed more tense. Could they know her own relationship to the slayer, Dawn wondered. She'd been Spike's friend for years. That might be in their files.

"Pretty name," the demon decided. "Pretty girl."

"She can go," Naziren said.

"Not quite yet." The Grauth caught Dawn's shoulder as she started to leave and directed her to a chair. "She was in possession of unauthorized weapons. I'm not sure we can let that slide." He flashed a meaningful smile at Willow, and Dawn pulled away and seated herself, concealing her belligerence with difficulty.
Straightening on the chair, Willow clasped her knees. Her legs remained too wide for a PG rating—she looked ready to perform a trick involving ping-pong balls in naughty places. There were times when Dawn envied Willow's double-agentry and imagined herself in the role: gun in garter belt and martini in hand, double-oh-seven-of-nine, a glamorous Jane Bond sweeping Tara off her feet. But at this particular moment her own flannel and hunting boots felt like armor. Let Willow have the spotlight. She felt safer in the shadows.

"Can't we overlook one tiny infraction, Colonel Liyoge? Dawnie's just protecting herself from those rude, misguided rebels." Willow's lips curved into a custom-made smile for the Grauth. No magic, but even Dawn could feel the charm being exerted.

"Answer our questions and we'll see what we can do," Naziren put in, lighting a cigarette from his position by the wall. He kept to the dark edges of the room like a moth resisting a candle.

Liyoge moved to loom over Willow. "This attack on the camps is a bad business."

"Terrible," she said agreeably.

"At nearly the same time, the defense barrier was compromised. Unfortunately, our warlocks alerted us too late to locate the source."

"Someone escaped?" Willow asked, concern reshaping her face. It looked almost real.

After studying her a few moments, Liyoge raised his shoulders in a casual shrug and began circling her chair. "Escaped or entered. We don't know which. Why don't you tell us?"

"Me?"

"Your name was mentioned in connection with both incidents."

Liyoge stood behind Willow now, but she didn't turn. She radiated the innocence of a little girl, happy to help with grown-up questions. "Mentioned by whom?"

"It was mentioned," Liyoge said flatly.

He circled into sight again. It brought him close to Dawn, his back half to her. Willow stared up at the Grauth while he stared down. The moment stretched taut along with Dawn's tingling nerves. Their evidence might be a bluff—Willow'd had nothing to do with the raid on the camps—but the danger was real. She was inching forward on her chair and measuring the distance to the gun on Liyoge's hip when Willow finally smiled and said, "I guess you've caught me."

The Grauth officers exchanged a look.

"I needed some fresh air, thought I'd take a walk." Her voice lilted. "So I got out my trusty spellbook and abracadabra, one back door. Or wait--I got on my broomstick, jumped over the moon. Hit the L.A. clubs and whammied myself home in time for breakfast."

"I'm glad you can find the humor in a state security breach, Captain."

"Oh come on, it's a funny accusation. I have no magic. No one does. You've seen to that."

"Yet the breach occurred. And the attack--led by the slayer, a man with whom you are notoriously intimate."

"Before we parted ways." Willow leaned back, looking comfortable and interested. "I thought he
was dead. In the permanent, ashy way of deadness."

"He is not," Naziren said from the shadows.

Liyoge began to pace a short circuit back and forth in front of Willow's chair. "We've put our trust in you, Captain Rosenberg. I've staked my own personal honor recruiting you. Some say that no human deserves rank in the Imperial Army. Maybe they're right."

"Haven't I served you loyally?" Willow asked, her voice taking on a chill. "Hitched my star to yours--embraced the dark side?"

"You're still only human. Your sympathies lie with--"

Willow stood abruptly, forcing Liyoge to step back. "My sympathies lie with those in power."

"Maybe we haven't given you enough power," Naziren said, finally moving forward, a ringmaster taking the spotlight. "We never wanted to waste your potential, dear Will. Impotent, hobbled--you're of limited use to us like this." The anger that flashed into her face didn't seem to faze him and he went on, low and compelling: "We can give you the spell keys to bypass the wynarivers. You'd be an Imperial warlock, far stronger than before." He stroked a wing of hair off her face, tucked it behind her ear to reveal a hash of sorcerous scars. "Before the council of watchers reduced your powers to hat tricks and jinxes."

Flinching back, Willow smoothed her hair loose again. "But I have to prove myself," she said, filling in the condition he'd left blank.

The intensity of Naziren's gaze deepened, and Dawn wanted to put herself between him and Willow, break the dangerous current. "You'll only be proving what you already know--that with power you are your own mistress, not some man's. Let us restore you to your former glory. Tell us where the slayer is."

It should have been a cheesy movie moment; Dawn desperately wanted it to be. The kind where you pause on false suspense for a commercial break, already knowing that nothing will tempt the heroine to betray her lover. But the look on Willow's face scared the trust right out of Dawn and left her cold.

She looked as if she'd just been handed a present.

"I can't believe you broke my ring!" Anya wailed for the umpteenth time.

Ump, as it turned out, was the magic number where bad reached unbearable. Her voice bored into Xander's inner ear like the ceti eel in Wrath of Khan, making him very suggestible to the other voice in his head which said to stuff a Nerf ball into that torrent of words for the good of humanity, dear god in heaven, his kingdom for a Nerf ball. But sadly he had no kingdom. Someone else's kingdom for a Nerf ball. King Tut's, King Ralph's, King Kong's.
Spike, a more patient man when it came to women, patted her shoulder comfortingly. "We'll get you a better one, love. Big as a baby's head."

After a ditzy smile of cheer, Anya appeared to lapse into pondering that disturbing image, and who could blame her.

"We do need a big stone," Angel said. "Not head sized, but--" He measured some air with his hands, trying to convey a few approximations while they all watched, then gave up somewhat lamely. "Big."

"So we go to this mine, right? A snatch and grab job, in and out." Xander cut a glance Spike's way for affirmation, but he didn't seem taken with the idea. The set of his mouth flattened and he stared at the map that had been laid out again on the table.

"No," he said after a moment, lifting his head. "I'll get the stone. The rest of you will stay here." Resolution hardened and clipped his words. Anyone who heard him speak in that tone knew to take it as a warning. When angry, Spike was a spark in a whirlwind, unpredictable and usually quick to burn out. In cold command he was almost impossible to stir.

Which of course obligated Xander to piss him off. Raising a hand, he said, "Pause for sanity check. Non-expendable slayer goes on dangerous mission alone. Again. Survey says?" He glanced around the table.

Buffy crossed her arms. Angel lowered the angle of his head a precise five degrees and managed to express his displeasure with no further effort. They both struck the same grim note Xander had. It was as if the years rolled back. How many times had they squared off just like this, negotiating the terms of some mission that might turn out to be their last?

"Xander's right." Buffy was fired up, her crossed arms a screen keeping the blaze barely in check. "You can't go all Lone Ranger every time there's a problem. I mean, why did you bring us here? To baby-sit civilians and serve soup?"

In the background a kid Xander vaguely recognized from high school--Justin? Joss? Jonathan--paused at Buffy's comment, irritation flashing across his face, then moved on with his carton of soup cans.

Spike's jaw tightened. "I lost two civilians on the last mission to that mountain," he ground out. "And you're here to do what I say you do. These people need nursing and they need training." With every word his voice got more deliberate. "There's more than enough work to go round, but if you can't stick it, by all means, there's the door." He nodded his head toward an emergency exit.

"That's not what I meant," Buffy said in sharp defense, but the way she uncrossed her arms and shifted was an admission of guilt even Xander could read.

"Sounded like it to me," Spike said coldly.

"This is beside the point," Xander said, reclaiming the vampire's gaze. The curve of Spike's neck held a polite attentiveness; his patience an edge. "You're not flying solo."

They locked eyes. Xander could actually see Spike's temper rising. "I can cover the ground faster by myself--if I've got to worry about you, you're a liability, not an asset. I haven't got time for games and I haven't got time for--" Head snapping around, he interrupted himself: "What, Anya?"

Anya, who'd been waving her hand for half a minute like a nerd determined to show off in class, lowered it and asked, "Why are you even going to the mountain? It's miles away and there are
plenty of rubies closer than that. Lady Elked has a whopper, ninety-seven carats. She wears it as a pendant—oh, and she keeps it in a safe in her townhouse." In the pause that followed she looked around at everyone's bemused expressions. "Home security is more important than ever in these troubled times."

Xander watched Spike's face soften into a smile for her that she returned with triumph, and a stab of petty jealousy hit him between the third and fourth ribs. In his absence, the women of Sunnydale had clustered round the slayer like spinsters flocking to an unmarried parson in some bedside British novel. And Spike soaked it up like a hot muffin soaked up butter. Annoying, butter-soaked muffin parson. Also—bisexuals? So not trendy anymore. Sure, he had that whole vampire thing going, perfect excuse, but Xander suspected it was just greed.

"Did I do good?" Anya asked.

Spike pulled her into his side with one arm and kissed the top of her tousled head, earning a giggle from her that made Xander's right hand clench in reflex. "Better than good. You did swell, sweetheart. I'm going to steal you a nice pair of earrings. And, course, any loose cash lying about."

"Cash!" Anya cried, and clapped her hands once in delight. What was she, twelve?

"So. Cat burglary it is," Xander said aloud, challenging Spike with a calm stare. Calm. Oh yes, he could be calm, and make no mistake about it, he would be going along on this mission if he had to bell the cat and dog his heels. He smiled. Barely. "Where do I pick up my mask?"

"That's a hell of an offer," Willow said, but she let nonchalance undercut her words. Couldn't show her excitement, didn't want to overplay her hand. "You understand, I don't know if the slayer's alive." Naziren gave her a complicit smile and said nothing. She took that as encouragement and ignored Dawn's increasingly urgent expressions behind the men's backs. "But if he is, I can help you capture him. You just have to know how he thinks."

"And how does he think?" Liyoge asked.

Willow let her lips curl in the faintest of sneers. "Like a human. He's brainwashed in the blood of the lamb, all brotherly love and braveheart. Next time you need propaganda, you should hire a watcher—if they can make vampires kill their own kind in the name of humanity, you'd be a shoo-in for the Nobel Peace Prize." She wandered to a window and yanked the blind obscuring it. With a snap and clatter the featureless room was overwhelmed by the facade of City Hall, which rose like a castle across the civic plaza, spotlights throwing its dome and spires into relief against the night.

"The slayer feels sorry for his food," she said, settling one hip on the sill. Below, a pair of guardsmen strolled across the historical cobblestones, past the statue of the brave soldier who seemed to be aiming his rifle at them, before disappearing into the shadowy palms. "Only cows and pigs for him now." She turned her head and matched gazes with Naziren. "Threaten his people. The good citizens of Sunnydale. Get the word out there'll be reprisals for the attacks on the camps—unless he turns himself in."
Dawn's fists were clenching. Willow could see her boiling, ready to spill over into words that would earn them both a firing squad. "Meanwhile, I'll see what I can find out," she went on smoothly, rising from the window. "Word on the street, gab in the pubs." The confidence of her stride parted the two Grauth, who let her pass. "Come on, Dawnie. Time to earn your keep."

In the hall, Dawn started to hiss something, but Willow grabbed her elbow in a twist and pulled her along, out of danger's earshot. When they turned a corner into an alcove, Dawn pivoted and slammed the heel of her hand into Willow's throat, knocking her against the wall to hold her there.

"Bitch," she said. "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you."

Choking: not fun. Also, kind of a barrier to making those life-saving replies. She brought a knee up but Dawn blocked it and retaliated with a vicious heel to the instep. As her vision began to cloud, Willow lifted one arm. A blade snicked out from her sleeve, coming to rest with precision against Dawn's throat. After a moment, Dawn loosened her hand and Willow was able to jerk free.

"Not nice, pint-sized." In a rough move she reversed their positions, pinning Dawn to the wall. Her knife had slashed a thin, shallow line along the girl's skin. "You don't really think I'd betray my lover, do you?"

"I just watched you," Dawn said coldly, managing an insolent slump despite the fist digging into her breastbone, her attitude suggesting she could break away but chose not to.

"Idiot." But her good mood--magic, she'd have magic again--made Willow forgiving and almost fond. "I've got a plan. Spike will be on board once I tell him." She let Dawn go, smiling to restore peace as she tucked her knife away. "He'll turn himself in. They'll have lots of questions. He'll string them along till I get my mojo running, and then bada bing--we'll rescue him, kill some greybacks, and wrap it all up with a night at the opera." It worked out so neatly, pretty and tidy and right, like a math equation. And exciting, too. The brainless feebs she'd gone to school with had never gotten it. Math could be beautiful when it was like this.

Dawn stared at her and gave a squeak of a laugh that conveyed disbelief. "Okay, you know you're nuts, right?"

"Nuty like a fox, baby."

"You want Spike to turn himself in for torture."

"Of course I don't want that," Willow said, a pump of anger quickening her heart. "But he only has to hold out for a little while--and it may not even come to that."

"You're putting him in the enemy's hands so you can get a fix." The accusation was flat with contempt. She was just asking for a good workover, something to take her down a peg, but Willow kept her voice even.

"Get it through your head," she said, stepping close. "Magic is the only thing that'll make a difference in this war. Not guns, not some macho kamikaze one-man raid, and not those little knife games you're getting so fond of. Magic. Me. I'm the only thing this town has going for it. The only thing standing between your parents and a tragic end. So unless you want them to spend the rest of their lives trapped here like bugs in a jar, I suggest you shut the hell up and get out of my way."

She turned on her heel and left Dawn white-faced against the wall. Never let it be said she didn't take the time to teach the children of tomorrow.
"I think we took a wrong turn at the dead rat," Xander said, studying the folded map while Spike shined the flashlight at it.

Spike shifted closer and transferred the light to his right hand, freeing his left to trace a finger along the marked route, and he was saying something about a shortcut but Xander spaced on the words, all parts of himself shutting down except for the spot between his neck and shoulder where Spike's right forearm rested for support, fitting itself to him like a pipe laid flush against the curve of a flange.

"...along here." A tap of finger to paper brought Xander's focus back to the map. "Should bring us within a block of the house," Spike calculated, then paused. Xander felt his gaze, then the weight removed from his shoulder. The vampire took a step away and shined the light ahead of them, making it a casual movement, as if there was nothing to it. And maybe there wasn't. Maybe there wasn't anything to them anymore.

The expected gut-wrench of jealousy and regret didn't come. Apparently there was only room for fear right now. He'd lost Spike a long time ago, but up until now he'd thought you couldn't lose a person more than once. He'd been oh so wrong. And here was a joke: it was only when memory came back that Xander even realized it had gone missing. The vertigo of crossing into Sunnydale and getting hit with the double whammy of loss and recovery had stayed with him. It seemed important to notice things, the way you'd jot notes on your hand to remember--the stink of the sewer, the way his shirt rubbed his skin, Spike's face in the shadows. This world was real, solid. But his fear of losing it again was a nightmare, as if his entire life was a paper napkin scribbled with a phone number of the one person he wanted to call. It had been taken from him. Sons of bitches. Fucking grauts. He'd already learned to hate them.

"You all right?" Spike asked. It was hard to read his expression in the darkness.

"Oh yeah." He found his last ounce of reassurance, but it tasted weak. "The sewers of home. Is there anything sweeter?"

The little chuff of air Spike gave was magnified by the acoustics of the tunnel to sound closer than it was. Goosebumps rose on Xander's skin. He'd heard that low-pitched laugh a hundred times in close quarters like this; a few times, across a pillow.

"Suspect the sewers of L.A. give you your money's worth."

They walked on, indifferent to the puddled filth under their boots. Familiar, bad, unimportant. "They lack the Sunnydale ambiance," Xander said, affecting the same offhand tone he might use to compare restaurants he didn't especially care about.

"How's the vamp community these days? Rodrigo still ruling the Heights?"

"Nah. The Cambodians own that territory now."

Spike shook his head. "Don't know why they call this place the Hellmouth."

"Amen," said Xander.
It was early morning, the time of day Giles most preferred even if the sky held no promise of sun. Mornings, the Peacock was closed for business and only a few prep cooks, the janitor, Malivia, and himself gave it life. But Giles rose earlier than Malivia and cherished the hour before she came downstairs to begin her daily rounds and torments. He sat on stage and picked out notes on the piano, a cup of tea resting on its corner--under Grauth occupation he grew more indifferent each day to the insult of hot china on polished wood.

The music he made was weaker than the Grauth idea of tea. He had no proficiency; his skill was for the guitar, but his was gone. It had been lost along with all his other possessions during the initial invasion.

"I close my eyes," he sang, "only for a moment, and the moment's gone. All my dreams pass before my eyes, a curiosity. Dust in the wind, all they are is dust in the wind." A melancholy adagio was as fast as his fingers could manage, but it seemed fitting for such a morning. With nothing and no one else breaking the quiet, he could almost pretend that the unlit club was empty, that he wasn't. "Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea. All we do crumbles to the ground, though we refuse to see..."

Catching sight of Tara at the edge of the stage, he broke off playing. She smiled and gave him a guilty wave before approaching with a curve of shoulders and head duck of diffidence, like a pupil afraid of importuning a teacher. He'd tried to curb that habit with reassurances that she was never a bother, but suspected that some trace of his impatience must be ineradicable; the barest sign and she'd shy like a horse scenting blood. She was often a reminder to him that a softer human nature did exist, that power could take different forms. For Dawn's sake if nothing else he made a regular effort to recognize her value.

"It's early to be out," he observed, descending from the stage with his tea to meet her. His gaze skipped from her wind-chapped face down to her neck and then her shoulders. "Where's your signum?" Concern made his voice sharp, and damn it, already he was chiding her, a librarian asking for a hall pass.

She pulled aside the lapel of her coat to flash the symbol pinned to her blouse. "The guards on morning patrol know me--they stop for coffee and help me open the shop."

"How thoughtful of them," Giles said, dropping his gaze to consider the steam rolling off his tea.

Whatever had been on the soft curl of his tongue--sugar and strychnine--made her own gaze lower, her hair slide forward like drawn curtains. "I brought you some things," she said, handing him the package she carried.

He set his tea on a table and took the bundle of paper and string, reminded of how grocers used to wrap meat when he was young, before cellotape and shop freezers were common. Everywhere he looked now, the world of his youth was creeping back, detail by detail, as if elves labored in the small hours to restore history, so that each morning he might find something new--a tombstone radio tuned to "The Goon Show," a toast-rack, a coal scuttle, cigarette cards and inkwells and
snooker tables. Things older than him; the world of his youth was, after all, just the lingering culture of his parents and their parents before him.

Inside the package were three watcher histories from his magic shop library, a box of Twinings, and a miscellany of candy bars, soap, and socks. Things one might collect for a prisoner who had not even the smallest comfort at hand.

"Thank you," he said, feeling grateful and ashamed.

"It's not much. I just thought you might want something that reminded you of home."

Home. She said it so simply, as if she knew where his home was, even if he didn't. "Yes. It does...remind me."

Her face fell a little and she stepped closer. "Giles, if you want to leave, I'm sure Spike would understand."

"I'm here for a purpose." He seated himself at the table, settled back into his chair, and took a sip of tea, each apparently casual movement calculated with an exactitude that would reveal nothing. Two years of student drama society; a lifetime of masquerade. "I've already gathered valuable intelligence, but there's more to be had. To leave now would be premature--we'd be remiss not to take advantage of this opportunity." His words sounded reasonable even to him. "Besides, things could be worse."

"I've never been sure if that's optimism or pessimism."

"I wonder myself. On the side of optimism, I count it lucky I was on hand that night and not one of you. And of course that I was noticed for my voice and not my roguish good looks."

Tara was hard to distract; his self-mockery didn't bait her into compliments nor lighten her frown. "So what have you learned?" she asked. He caught a hint of challenge in the question and immediately his mind stuttered like a car running out of petrol and came up blank.

"Oh, yes, well. There's a certain colonel, Colonel Tregor in the Labor Ministry, who has a penchant for black powder--the, er, drug--which could make him susceptible to our influence. And rumor has it that Lady Elked runs quite a sideline in society blackmail, with incriminating material on a number of officers." He was floundering. "I'm sure I'll learn more," he said, voice rising to a hopeful pitch. He lifted his tea cup to halt the drivel coming from his mouth. "Soon." He took a sip.

With unexpected resolve, Tara shook her head. "It isn't worth it, Giles. I'm going to tell Spike you need to be evicted."

"I believe the term is 'extracted,'" he noted gently. "And I'd rather you didn't. It may not sound like much, but I assure you, the Peacock is a hub of--of information and covert activity--"

"Mister Giles! Mister Giles!" A boy with a grubby face and clothes Oxfam would have spurned came running into the club, breathless and clutching a piece of paper.

Giles glanced sidelong at Tara, feeling caught out and faintly embarrassed.

The boy lurched to a halt and thrust the sheet into his hands. "They're putting these up all over town," he said, and after a brief pause that brought no response from Giles, added, "You said to let you know if anyone was looking for the slayer."

After a moment he looked up with grim eyes and passed the paper across the table to Tara. It was a placard, its sketch not a perfect likeness but unmistakably Spike, even to the glint in his eye and a dry smirk around the lips. SLAYER, the caption read in English and Grauth. Wanted for crimes against the state. 10,000 turgrik in reward for information leading to his capture.

Someone had betrayed them.

The bounce of lights and voices off the tunnel walls ahead halted Spike. He snapped off his torch and lifted a hand to stop Xander from walking further. The angle of his body brought his hand into contact with Xander's chest, palm flat against ribs. Heat radiated through wool and a rising heartbeat tugged Spike's attention away from where it should be. When he glanced back at Xander's face, he found it blank.

"Soldiers," he said in an undertone.

Xander nodded and twisted his head to search the tunnel around them, sharp and silent. Without doubling back, the only place for concealment was a rift where the masonry had crumbled away from the ancient timber that shored the tunnel. They stepped in, faced out, and held still, invisible in the darkness as the soldiers neared and passed. In the narrow recess their bodies pressed back to front, familiar as sin.

The slide of Xander's arms around him was no great shock. Spike let his eyes close for a moment. Xander belted his waist with an arm, stroked a hand up along Spike's ribs, coming to rest over his dead heart.

Lips tightening, Spike could say nothing while the soldiers passed, their boots splashing the muddy sewer water just yards away. He was angry--told himself he was goddamn angry--then forgot the point as the graze of Xander's body became a push and pull. He worked himself back in an answering, silent grind, a dance without music. A steady hitch of breath was heating the side of Spike's neck, then Xander brushed his lips there and Spike broke and pulled Xander's hand between his legs. The Grauth's voices chopped across each other harshly, near enough for mortal danger--stinks like human soup down here; can't take any feckin' more of this--while Xander dragged his hand up and down. Spike mimicked the movement, shoulder blades slicing a hard chest, then Xander was unzipping him and reaching in. The knot of silence drew tight in Spike's throat. Already coming, he might have shouted if Xander hadn't clamped a hand up to stop him. They wrestled in a quiet frenzy until Xander's hips jerked and his teeth closed on Spike's neck. Spike groaned into the hand covering his mouth.

Afterwards they stepped apart and Spike zipped up, his back to Xander, ignoring the rough clean-up the same way Xander ignored his. When they finally turned and looked at each other, they found nothing to say. They continued on.
Anya plunked a pan down on the table in front of Jonathan. It made a light sloshing sound and had a familiar, unsavory odor. "Someone peed in the soup tureen."

Repelled, he stared at the object, then up at her. Anya had a way of making him feel doubtful, voicing her askew perceptions of the world so confidently that he had to double-check his math, so to speak. Then again, in Sunnydale reality always did seem a few decimal points off.

"It is an Army bed pan," he said. "It's meant for pee."

She sat down across from him while he gingerly slid the bed pan aside. "I may not be able to alter reality any more, little boy, but if I say a thing's a tureen, it's a tureen."

"I'm not a little boy," he objected irritably, then remembered how unwise it was to argue with Anya as she gazed at him with a level of incomprehension both massive and frightening. "Unless...you say I am," he added with caution.

"The refugees are getting on my nerves." Anya's thoughts had moved on, and Jonathan breathed again with relief. "They're asking for clean clothes and board games. Some want to leave. They think they can just walk out of here and go home."

Pity stirred in him as he looked at the people on the floor. Most people had woken from their night's rest and the buzz of conversation had gotten louder as the hours dragged on. A few were crying, rocking, and the wounded were being cared for, but most just looked lost. Buffy was resetting a woman's broken arm. Angel was standing in a knot of men, listening to a petition or complaint. The man speaking to him pointed across the room to where sundry demons crouched, shooting craps.

"Spike'll be back soon," Jonathan said, squashing down his unease.

"But where are they going to go?" Anya was for some reason peeling the labels off empty cans and smoothing them out into a pile. "They can't stay here. There's not enough room, and even if there was, they're noisy and they smell. I want them to go away."

Even for Anya that was blunt, and yet it was true. He should feel a bond of common humanity, compassion for his fellow sufferers, but he hadn't felt it in high school and he didn't feel it now. Last night an old woman bit his ankle when he tried to take her dinner plate away. He'd be happy as Anya to see the wretched refuse gone, but when it came to figuring out where they could settle, his own imagination failed.

With an awful sense of guilt, he admitted, "Yeah."

"Well, hey!" A hand slapped him on the shoulder to match that false heartiness, and Jonathan went on alert, stiff and wary as Willow took a seat at the end of the table. She'd been like him once, a geek on the fringes--red pigtails, shy smiles, dorky jokes. When the cheerleaders took the halls, sweeping aside everything in their path, he'd often find himself pressed up against the lockers next to her. Magic had changed all that, made her glossy and hard and crueler than any cheerleader could ever hope to be. She knew the geek code and she'd used it against her own kind.
It wasn't that he blamed her for hopping the first train out of Loserville and riding it to the end of the line. Maybe Luke could resist Lord Vader, but who else in their right mind would turn down power, success, minions? He understood completely. He just didn't like her anymore.

"Hey," he said. Anya echoed his greeting with lackluster acknowledgment.

Scanning the room, Willow asked, "Where's Spike?" Right to the point. No wasting pleasantries on droids.

"Out." Jonathan tried to be terse, but he found it hard in practice. He liked to provide intel. "He went with Xander to find a ruby. For the wynariver."

Willow whipped her head around and pinned Jonathan with a look. There was something terrible in her eyes, not the blackness of deep magic, but something that made him instinctively cringe and wish he'd kept his mouth shut.

"What?" she said, rising to stand over him. Her voice was so loud that heads turned. "What are you talking about?"

"Angel got it working--he reversed the field--but it overloaded. They needed a better gem."

"Because they ruined my ring," Anya supplied in the tone of one who keeps a running tally of all debits and credits against her personal account.

"Where are they?"

Jonathan glanced at Anya before answering the question, but no help was to be found there. "In town," he said with reluctance, hoping nothing bad would come of sharing this information. "At Lady Elked's."

"No--oh no."

Her theatrical tone left Jonathan cold, with the faintest hint of disdain. He had no sympathy for her problems any more, unless they affected the slayer. And then it began to sink in: she'd only be this upset if it did.

She was murmuring to herself. "I didn't have to..."

"Have to what?" he asked sharply.

"I have to go. If Spike comes back, keep him here. It's important."

She swept off, Darth Vader with black cloak billowing, and Jonathan watched her go with deep worry. She was the slayer's woman. He wasn't supposed to question her, to doubt her, to harbor this deep mistrust. But he did.

"Well?" Dawn challenged when Willow appeared at the camouflaged escape hatch. The door
clanged as it was shut, but no more loudly than the crickets and restless night birds around them in the brush. "What did he say to your plan?"

The witch flashed her a look that gave Dawn the heebie-jeebies. "He wasn't there. He went into town."

Coldness touched Dawn's spine, right around her lower back where she'd replaced her pistol. "We've got to get to him. He might--"

"I know."

"If he--"

"I know."

They were on the same page for once, Dawn thought as they took off at a run. Somehow that didn't reassure her.

"When I was little I thought cat burglars stole cats," Xander said as they climbed into Lady Elked's townhouse through a second-story window. "My Uncle Rory stole cats. I'd hold the bag. He told me the Army needed them to carry canteens of water to the wounded. Later I found out he was studying taxidermy. And that we weren't actually at war."

Pausing by a marble bust of a ferocious-looking Grauth with curly ram's horns, Spike watched Xander lever himself over the sill, bump into a table, and nearly topple a vase, which he caught and righted only at the last moment.

"Cat burglar's quiet," he said dryly. "Like a cat."

"I know how to keep quiet." The seriousness of Xander's tone made the comment pointed.

Spike let that one pass and navigated around a herd of overstuffed chairs toward a ghastly ancestral portrait that either hid a wall safe or guarded the gates of hell. The ornate frame must have weighed a hundred pounds, but he lifted it off and set it down lightly on the carpet.

"Bingo, Raffles." Xander played his flashlight across the safe. "Now for a light-fingered caress of the tumblers--"

Spike punched out the lock and pulled the door open.

"--and another childhood fantasy bites the dust."

"No time for fantasies," Spike said. More harshness bled through than he'd intended, but what the buggering fuck did it matter, not like he had a soul.

"No?"
Ignoring him, Spike began pulling out the contents of the safe and stacking them on the bureau beneath it, opening whatever looked likely. Diamond parure in a fitted case. Pearls in a bag. Fat leather wallet of ribboned documents. Box of photos and papers. Next to him, Xander examined everything he discarded.

"Money sticks, earrings, more earrings," Spike rattled off in growing impatience. "Woman must have ears all over her body. Earrings, earrings, gun, earrings."

"Nice gun."

Spike turned away from the safe with the last velvet bag as Xander slipped the gun into a pocket. "This must be it," he said, pulling out a pendant with a red gem in the center of a diamond cluster. He rubbed his thumb across the surface, then tilted a closer look around the room they'd broken into, noting the elaborate fireplace, the Persian rug, the trinkets that covered every surface like a china snowfall. "Eat the rich," he muttered.

"Hey," Xander said, drawing his attention back. He was leafing through the documents. "Could these be important? I can't make anything out, but if she's keeping them in the safe..."

"Take it all. Little misdirection won't hurt."

Xander tucked the packet away, then returned with Spike to the open window, where they both hesitated. "Want to kill anyone while we're here?" Xander asked.

A smile twitched to life in Spike's lips, and he looked off to one side, afraid that Xander would smile back and he'd be tricked into giving away too much, too easily. "Nah."

"What if I stayed?"

The thoughts didn't follow and for a moment Spike didn't get it, then did. Tension crept back into his shoulders, made his neck stiff. What kind of mealy-mouthed, prick-teasing question was that, for fuck's sake?

Aloud he said, "You've got your own patch now. Different city, different life. Just like you wanted."

"Not like I wanted."

Something snapped in Spike. "You said this was a curse you had to shake," he said furiously. "Said it wasn't normal. Like anything's normal, you stupid tosser." The words tumbled out, rising in volume. "I'm not normal. Never will be, never want to be. I wanted you. You left. It's done. I've got someone else now."

Xander dropped his gaze, mouth tighter as if he were keeping back things he knew better than to say. Boiling over, Spike had plenty more to say, five years' worth of plenty, but just then a light went on in the hall, throwing a wedge of light into the room, and a voice called, "Bunny? Is that you?"

They climbed out with due haste, knocked into each other on the wet shingles, slipped around in a comical pas de deux, and fell off the roof together into a shrubbery.

"Ow," Xander said.

Rolling off the shelf of leaves, Spike stumbled back several paces and saw that they'd dropped into a topiary shaped like a Brontosaurus.
"Bloody hell," he said with feeling, and then: "Xander, don't move. You're trapped in a dinosaur."

Xander turned his head and peered across a heap of leaves at him with a regretful expression. "I know. I'm trying to change." Yanked from his nest with Spike's help, he staggered to his feet in a shower of loose leaves and then stared. "Oh. That's...surprisingly literal."

"Come on."

They ran across the grounds as more lights went on and dogs began to bark. Reaching the edge, Spike cupped his hands to boost Xander over the wrought-iron fence before leaping himself. In the distance screams of outrage came through the window they'd left open. The street adjoining Lady Elked's townhouse was deserted and they sprinted across it and ran into an alley moments before a patrol Jeep zipped past.

"There's a tunnel entrance somewhere around here," Xander said, apparently remembering local landmarks.

Frowning, Spike cocked his head. "You hear that?" He took a few steps toward the far end of the alley and listened, filtering out the siren wails and dog barks. Somewhere ahead in the city center a voice was echoing off the buildings, augmented by a loudspeaker. He met Xander's eyes briefly, then took off in the direction of the broadcast.

Willow and Dawn kept pace with each other as they ran across town. The dead streets were coming to life, arteries trickling with morning commuters, the Grauth in cars, humans on foot as they headed out of their restricted quarter and into the wealthier city center to perform whatever menial jobs they'd been lucky enough to be allotted. The number of patrolling guards had increased along with the swell of travelers and as Willow and Dawn dashed across Eucalyptus Street just in advance of a passing convoy, two guards slowed to intercept them on the other side.

One raised his hand to halt them while the other lifted his gun in a disturbingly casual way.

"Ho now, where's the flame?" the first guard asked. "You don't want to be running, little geese. You know what they say--" He opened his mouth to deliver his homily, then paused to scratch one horn with a vague frown. He turned to his companion. "What do they say, Grek?"

"A running human is a dead human," Grek supplied, raising his gun a notch higher.

Impatience etching her face to tension, Willow flicked her cloak back to reveal her insignia. "I'm a ranking officer in Reich Army Intelligence on Imperial business. And you--are delaying me." The last three words were bitten off.

"Sorry, sir." The guards parted to let them pass, and when Dawn glanced back over her shoulder a moment later they were already moving on.

"I remember when you couldn't talk your way out of a hall pass," she said as they picked up speed again.
Willow didn't break stride or even look at her. "History will remember me differently."

As they neared the outskirts of City Hall, the voice on the loudspeaker grew sharper and stronger, carried through the alleys of the surrounding buildings, but Xander still couldn't quite make out the words.

"Whoa," he said as he spotted a large poster on the brick wall ahead of him, the face on it recognizable, the fact of it chilling. "This is so not good."

Stopping beside him, Spike scrutinized the poster. "Yeah," he said. "They got my nose wrong." He sounded critical and piqued.

"Not what I meant. If they're outing you, they're turning up the heat. This kind of thing," he gestured, "it inspires people, gives them hope. The Grauth wouldn't risk elevating you into a rebel hero unless they're planning an all-out manhunt or worse."

With one thought they glanced down the alley in the direction of the civic plaza. Gut twisting, Xander knew by Spike's face that decisions were already made, fate set on its stupid course, but he tried the obvious on the chance the vampire might listen for once. "We can't stay here."

"They're calling me." Spike cocked his head with a listening air and a resigned look that Xander hated. "Calling for the slayer."

"I'm thinking: don't go." Words that might have been glib rose instead from a deep, tight place in Xander's chest.

Spike showed no sign of having heard him. "Better see what they want."

They made their way to the edge of the plaza, Xander scanning every rooftop to make sure they weren't walking into an ambush. A growing crowd of humans and Grauth filled the square, necks craned for a view of the City Hall steps, where an officer stood at a podium, speaking into a microphone. Behind him a rank of guards kept watch, guns held upright at the ready. On a platform off to the side of the plaza, a gallows had been built and spotlighted, and a woman stood with her neck in a noose, hands behind her back. Even from this distance, Xander could tell she was crying.

"Oh my god," he said, taking it all in. Over the hushed crowd, the officer's voice was ringing, amplified by the loudspeakers.

"We've asked the slayer to turn himself in," he said. "Time and again, we've offered leniency if he'll only cease the brutal massacre of innocents. Time and again he has refused, sending back the bodies of our comrades as his message--but his victims are not just Grauth--they're humans, like you," a hand outstretched to the crowd, "who've committed no crime but to live as best they can in this brave new world. His crusade hurts all of you. This vampire feeds off you!" The Grauth paused to let the outrage sink in.
"For our vampire allies," he went on with righteous complacency, "we've established blood banks to take your patriotic donations. But this slayer kills your children, your wives and husbands. Just last night he attacked an Imperial Work Center, butchering dozens. Why? Because, as he wrote in this letter to us--" He raised a piece of paper, then lowered it to read. "--I'll kill all humans if I have to. You will have no hostages against us."

He paused in affected sorrow as murmurs spread through the crowd. Stunned, Xander finally understood the phrase "farrago of lies." Still no clue what a farrago was, but that didn't get in the way of his certainty. He looked to see how Spike was taking this. His jaw was wire-taut, drawing a line of fury under his profile.

On the steps, the officer raised his bowed head. "But we do have hostages--the poor, misguided souls taken in by the slayer's guile. Like this woman," he gestured at the gallows, "Lisa Crowell, a terrorist with six Grauth kills to her name--"

"No," the woman on the gallows broke in, turning a desperately pleading face to the crowd. "It's a lie! It's all lies! I don't know any slayer, I never even--"

A soldier on the platform stepped forward and struck the woman's head with the butt of his gun before gagging her.

"Justice will be served," the Grauth officer said, and nodded at the hangman.

The suddenness of it caught Xander completely off guard. The hangman pulled the handle, the trapdoor opened, the woman dropped. Somewhere in the crowd another woman cried out and was quickly silenced by those around her. Next to him, Spike closed his eyes.

The officer squared his shoulders and paced the length of the steps, microphone in hand, voice rising. "We know you're listening, slayer. Executions will continue until you come forward, one every fifteen minutes. Only you can stop this! Come, and we'll offer them rehabilitation. If you don't, their lives are forfeit."

Spike turned to Xander, pushing the stolen ruby into his hand. "Take this to Angel. It's down to him now."

"They're going to crucify you." He imagined he could feel every one of the ruby's facets in the white-knuckled clench of his fist.

"It'll take a while." Spike sounded unconcerned. "Interrogation, bit of torture. I expect it'll be days before they drag me out for the grand finale."

The neutral calculation made Xander's throat constrict. "We'll get you out before that happens."

"You do that," Spike said, then hesitated before adding, "If you can. Otherwise...Saint William has a nice ring to it." The joke didn't quite come off, or maybe he was half serious.

Xander could feel Spike watching him, waiting for him to look up, but he wasn't ready for that yet. Spike's jacket collar was frayed, he noticed, trying to fix something into memory. He used to be more fastidious about his appearance. But with the shine rubbed away, it was easier than ever to see what was underneath. Focused on the immediate need, Spike would hang if it meant saving even one human. A demon, grudging, cynical, literally soulless, he shouldn't care whether another housewife lived or died. But he did his job. Xander still didn't have a clue why. He was like one of those magic tricks where you keep pulling at the scarves but never get to the end or figure out where they're coming from. Why did he ever cave to the watchers when there was so little in it for
him? He wasn't weak but he'd given in; wasn't human but spent the last century hanging out in smoky jazz clubs and salons and cafes and mosh pits, attending overcast rugby matches and dress balls, reading poetry, eating unnecessary onion rings, watching soap operas, over-tipping maternal waitresses he had no intention of killing, all of this right up to the point when the watchers collared him. And here he was.

The clock was ticking and Xander knew he had to walk away. Any moment now. "Remind me why we do this hero gig again?"

Spike shrugged with feigned nonchalance. "I'm in it for the money. Dunno about you."

"At least you were drafted. Me? Idiot."

"Yeah," Spike said, almost allowing a smile. He reached out and smoothed a lock of Xander's hair down, and then there was a kiss--a brush of cool lips, over too fast, not even a rude tongue to remember him by--and he was gone.

"Damn it," Willow said as they reached the plaza and crashed up like a wave against a shore of bodies. She couldn't see anything over the heads of the gawking crowd, and when a wide man with a tall hat stepped in front of her, she clapped her hand to her pistol in pure annoyance, fingers curling around the grip. But shooting her fellow man was bad and wrong, plus he'd probably just fall and block her way, so she let her hand drop again. "They said they'd wait until I got back."

"Looks like they started without you," Dawn said needlessly.

Willow led the way around the edge of the square, carving a path through the fringes of the crowd. Men leaned against the wrought-iron fence that bordered the neighboring park. Above them in the trees, kids perched like monkeys to watch the show.

"I had this all choreographed." She pushed aside a knot of kids she might have gone to high school with. Behind her, complaining voices rose then lowered abruptly into horrified whispers. "I told them I'd put the word out," she said, more to herself than to Dawn, anger deepening as she nursed the insult of how they'd blown her off. "They're so inept. It's like they're staging a school play instead of a--"

Dawn grabbed Willow's arm just as she was about to walk into a large wooden platform that shouldn't have been there.

"Oh my god," Dawn said.

Willow's gaze rose and locked on the body swinging from the gibbet, head lolling above the noose, hands still bound. "No." Denial broke out in a million prickles of gooseflesh and a sweep of vertigo nearly knocked her backward. "This wasn't supposed to--they weren't supposed to actually kill anyone." She looked at Dawn for confirmation. "It was just a trick, to get him here."

Face white, Dawn couldn't seem to keep her eyes away from the platform, and Willow turned back
to see a guard dragging away the body while his partner shoved a new victim into place. The man began gabbling a prayer as the Grauth fixed the noose around his neck.

"The slayer is a coward!" Liyoge declared from the steps. His microphone picked up the surge of his own voice and drove a shriek of feedback into Willow's head, making it ring and ache. "How many more must die before he accepts responsibility for his actions?"

"You are so stupid," Dawn seethed, snapping Willow's focus back on her. "I can't believe I let you do this--that I wanted your help!" She elbowed herself past a cluster of people, working her way behind the platform and toward the steps.

Willow seized her arm, whirled her to a stop. "Where are you going?"

"To find Spike! When I tell him what you did, you're through. You'll be lucky to spend the rest of this war in an Initiative cell polishing your leg irons. Or maybe he'll finally listen to us and put you six feet further down."

A pair of guards glanced their way, attention pricked by Dawn's sharp voice. Willow stiffened as one caught her eye and then nodded at him. She had Dawn's weapons in hand before the girl could even react.

"Take this rebel into custody," she ordered the guards.

Dawn gaped in shock for a moment, then went for her throat. The transfer was a struggle, and when the girl was secured between the Grauth, hands bound, she spat at Willow in a predictable and futile gesture of contempt.

Wiping her face with one black leather glove, Willow found it remarkably easy to meet Dawn's eyes. "Put her in isolation," she told the guards. "Feel free to use a choke-chain if she gets testy."

Released of her watch-dog, she made her way to the front of City Hall and with great relief saw Naziren lurking off to the side, watching Liyoge with the skeptical eye of a theater critic judging an understudy's performance.

"Colonel Naziren--"

"Ah, Rosenberg. Excellent timing. I must congratulate you. I had my doubts that this plan would work--"

"About this plan--"

"Here, I think, is the man of the hour."

Heart jerking against her ribs, Willow followed his gaze and saw Spike ascending the far side of the steps as guards swarmed to enclose him. He saw her at the same moment. Their eyes met, his lit with relief, and then she watched the comprehension sink in, the shock detonate: betrayal, pain, anger.

The guards cuffed Spike's hands, knocked him a few steps closer to the podium. From the crowd rose a clash of cheers and jeers in almost matching force, and in the space of a few seconds the orderly mass of bodies began to shift and boil into incoherence. Too much frustrated energy, too much feeling--too many humans, Willow realized in a flash of foreboding. Not enough Grauth.

"The slayer!" Liyoge announced.
And the crowd surged forward.

Angel considered himself a patient guy, but there was a limit, and he'd maxed his out. He held his face like granite and stared into the eyes of the woman talking to him, willing her to succumb to his vampire authority, his leashed menace, to a honed and steely gaze that made mortals quail and minions cower.

"...and that brings us to item number eight, regarding the unequal allotment of blankets. Certain elements among the refugees have been hoarding the blanket supply and nesting in them."

The woman spared a pointed look for the Gromnere demon next to her. "It's the request of the Coalition to Represent Unified Sunnydale Humanity that blankets be collected and redistributed fairly, starting with humans, who have the most right to them."

"Well knowing that humans outnumber the blankets," the Gromnere snarled, "thus our kind will have none!"

"You have fur," the woman snapped back. "And you stole those blankets!"

The Gromnere bristled and its pelt became pink. "We won't yield them without a fight. We've marked them with the spoor of our clan."

"Oh my god." The woman raised her clipboard to her bosom as if to shield against any sudden spoorish strafe.

On the far side of the Initiative chamber a red emergency access door burst open with a bang that captured Angel's attention; over the heads of his petitioners he saw Xander arrive in a breathless state, look around, then pause, half doubled over, clutching his ribs. The mixed scents of blood, sweat, and adrenaline struck Angel from across the room even through a crowd of other bodies. He walked forward with no further regard for the refugees, forcing them to step aside as he swept through.

"I beg your pardon," he heard the woman huff as he left.

He knew it was bad and as he zeroed in on Xander he made a stone of his heart against whatever news he might hear. He didn't claim much imagination, but when you had experience and a demon you didn't need any. You already knew the worst that could happen.

"Tell me," he said when he reached Xander's side. He pulled the other man's hand from his shirt; it came away bloody.

"This--nothing. Just some guards who got in my way." Xander straightened up, and Angel saw his face clearly for the first time, rigid stoicism over intense fear, like a victim who sees the fangs descend and realizes just how he's going to die. "Spike." Xander took a steadying breath. "He's turned himself in. They were killing people, calling for the slayer. He went."

Angel tightened his mouth against the sharp and angry things he could have said about Spike's
impulse control. The person he needed to say them to wasn't here.

"I brought this," Xander went on, and handed Angel the ruby they'd gone to find.

They'd left the repaired wynariver ready for another go. The chamber around them was abuzz with arguments and the air seemed to hold a static, waiting charge of electricity that hadn't found release. Buffy, Anya, and Jonathan converged to join them at the table. Xander pulled his jacket tight in a way that hid his wound, but everyone else's attention was focused on the gemstone.

"You got it," Buffy said.

Angel popped the stone from its setting, tossed aside a hundred thousand dollars' worth of diamonds with complete indifference, then made some final adjustments to the wynariver.

"It's so large." Anya picked up the ruby, face flushing with an almost sexual glow as she turned it between her fingers. Lips parted, she seemed to be slipping into a light trance. "It'd be a shame to blow it to smithereens."

Buffy glanced back toward the main area of the room expectantly. "Where's Spike?"

"Prisoner," Xander said.

Anxiety ricocheted around the group and the others raised their heads. Buffy looked stricken.

"What? How?"

"If this works, it won't matter how." Xander was lockjawed and grim. "We need magic."

"Can't Willow help?" Anya let Angel take the ruby away from her, no longer distracted by its charm. "Isn't that what she does now--pull strings and bully people?"

"She was here earlier," Jonathan said, looking queasy as if a thought had just struck someplace hard and low. "Looking for Spike. It seemed...urgent."

Even Angel paused what he was doing to regard Jonathan, arrested by the word. When he met Buffy's eyes, he could tell they were sharing the same uncharitable suspicions.

Of them all, Xander looked the least surprised. The calmness of his face said that this wasn't even a speedbump in the skidding car wreck the day had become. "If she had anything to do with this...that's it. Those old ties don't bind anymore." He glanced up and around. "I hope she doesn't owe anyone here money."

"We'll get him back," Angel said. He picked up the plans and launched the key-spell again with determination. As a glow began to expand along the wynariver's spokes, everyone around the table took a pointed step back. Discs revolved and the core lit up as the spell came to an end and the device balanced on its spindle. After only the briefest hesitation, Angel lifted the prime disc and realigned it.

The wave hit at once, something cold and large slapping him from a kind of sleep. Again, he thought. Again. Son of a bitch. It was just as shocking the second time around--the third--as memories of Buffy surged through him, restoring him to life like blood through dead veins.

"Holy crap," said Jonathan, staring saucer-eyed at the wynariver.

Incomprehensibly, Anya had pulled up her shirt to inspect her belly, palming its contours. "Are you all right?" she asked it. "Hello in there!" She raised stricken, anxious eyes. "Xander, I forgot our
baby!

Xander had fixated on her belly as well, and looked as if he were expecting an alien to burst out of it. "Anya," he said in a raw voice. "Oh god."

"Spike's not the slayer." Jonathan sounded disappointed as reality struck, and gave Buffy a skeptical once-over. "You are. That's...weird."

Oz joined them with an amazed light in his eyes and a tiny, lopsided grin. "So, hey, did anyone else just feel a massive shift like the universe collapsed and refolded all our identities in some crazy origami?" His hands danced in the air a little as if trying to put his thoughts across. "Or was that just me?"

"Not just you," Buffy said, then did a double-take. "Oz?"

"So that was trippy." His brows knit and he surveyed the Initiative room. "Also, I kinda don't think I'm supposed to be here."

"We'll...sort that out later," Buffy said. "Right now we have to figure out if everyone's okay. Dawn? Has anyone seen Dawn? Or Giles? Or--"

"Spike!"

Spotting what might have been a flash of white-blond hair on the far side of the steps, Willow aimed for it, dodging elbows and batting away swung purses. The crowd had broken through the security cordon and poured up the steps of City Hall, mobbing the outnumbered Grauth, who were beginning to sink one by one under an onslaught of blows. As she worked through the crush, she wrenched off her uniform tunic and let it drop, but not before it caught a man's eye.

"You're one of them," he said, red-faced and wild-eyed. "Traitor!" He backhanded her hard enough to bring tears. "Grab her!"

Hands snagged her blouse and hair, ripping fabric and roots. She screamed and fought to get loose, her instincts a hash--shut her eyes, hold her blouse together, hunch, curl up. When she felt her pistol tugged loose from behind her, fear iced her spine in a single, sharp instant. She pushed forward crazily for escape, crashed into someone's chest, and felt a dozen hands loosen and let go. Sobbing in near hysteria she looked up and saw Spike.

"Come on," he said, and dragged her toward the building's front doors. Another line of guards barricaded the entrance but a door was cracked to let them pass. For one topsy-turvy moment Willow thought they recognized her authority, but it was Spike they'd let in. She was incidental.

"They don't remember," she whispered after they passed safely through. "You're just you again."

Spike halted by the visitor's desk, below the Imperial flag. He stroked her hair back and wiped some blood from her cheek. "You all right?"
His hands were gentle, and for a breath or two she lost her bearings. Just ten minutes ago she'd loved him with insane intensity. But she'd still been willing to turn him in. She felt rearranged, horrible. Not entirely herself yet.

"This your doing?" he asked, glancing back outside through the front doors. A rock cracked a window. The nearest guard broke the remaining glass, settled his gun, and began to fire into the crowd.

"What? No! I--oh god, this, this wasn't supposed to happen!"

"You sure of that?" His cynical laugh baffled her, and she could only stare. "Must be nice, always being so sure of things. You were dead sure of me, as I recall. Had me pegged--bad for Buffy, going to betray her. Funny, that. It being you who was me." His face filled with some deep and terrible feeling that Willow felt sure was totally out of place in this conversation. "You betrayed me."

"Like you would have betrayed her!"

"Oh no," Spike said softly on a head shake. "I don't think so."

"And you!" she shot back with unexpected bitterness. "Don't tell me that you weren't cuddling up to Xander the minute I was out the door."

His expression changed to one of almost comical horror. "Oh...god."

Screams rose outside as more shots stuttered from the window. "We need to help them," Willow said.

"Too late. We need to help ourselves."

His words struck home. "Dawn," she said, remembering what she'd done.

"What about her?" Spike's voice had an edged quality.

"I kind of turned her into the authorities."

He cocked his head, gave her a squint that might have held respect. "Really grabbed that baton and ran with it, didn't you, Red? Guess we'd better spring her." His gaze darkened, stirring in Willow a squirming beetle feeling she didn't like. "Before anything happens you'll die to regret."

"Is that a threat?" She mustered derision. "Didn't take you long, slayer."

She started to move away, but he caught the side of her neck, turned her face back and smiled. "I wouldn't be so high and mighty, witch. Not any more. Not when I'll be," he traced a finger to her collarbone, "treasuring the memories."

That could be fixed, Willow thought, but she had those memories too, undermining her sick angry shudder with an entirely different kind of feeling. She wouldn't name it though. Naming brought things to life. This was better off dead.
"We were just coming to look for you," Buffy said, accepting the cannonball of Dawn into her arms for a hug. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." Dawn squeezed her the way she used to squeeze teddy bears. "I mean, aside from existential freak-out number three-hundred and twelve and the whole, strange lesbian thing I'm trying to forget." She gave Willow an apologetic wince. "No offense."

"No worries." Willow had no trace of a smile. "You probably should forget that."

An awkward silence fell as heavily as an elephant dropped from a cargo plane. Here they were, grouped again at the door where Angel and Giles had first arrived; the universe back on track. But it was like when you took something apart, a radio or a toaster, and somehow ended up with more pieces than you started with. There was too much left over that didn't fit.

Buffy glanced around, saw Spike looking at Xander, Xander flinching away, Angel studying Spike. God. She really didn't want to know the things she knew.

"Okay," Dawn finally said in jittery exasperation, "I can't be the only one wondering--what the hell happened?"

"Harkness," said Xander. He looked at Angel with some strange man-to-man connection that had never been there before. "I thought the spell was holding. But I wasn't even the problem."

"Who's Harkness?" Willow asked, brows knitting in concern. Buffy could tell she hated being out of the loop. "What spell?"

"An angry, bitter old creep, trying to raise a demon." Xander sounded like he had a personal stake in the matter. "Way out of his depth. We're the lab rats to his mad scientist." He glanced at Angel again. "Angel here is Typhoid Mary. Or maybe that's Patient Zero."

"Okay, translate?" Willow pleaded, with a frustrated vibe.

"I'm infected," Angel said. His eyes flicked to Buffy, then back to Willow. "With chaos. One of Harkness's accidents. I was under a spell to control it. But when I turned on the wynariver--"

"You got it working?" Willow broke in. "You?"

A miffed expression crossed Angel's face. "What, I'm all brawn, no brain, is that it?"

"Oh, well, if you're going to make it easy," Spike said in a dry and cutting tone.

A sudden giggle bubbled up from Buffy and all eyes turned to her. "Sorry," she said, directing an apologetic look at Angel with a smile hidden inside. "It's just--you were such a geek."

The miffedness rose a notch. "I wasn't a geek."

"Hey, wait a minute," Willow said slowly, turning accusing eyes on Buffy.

Any laid a hand over her stomach and shifted closer to Xander. Her face was drawn with tiredness. "I don't like all this. Scrambling the universe and my eggs. It's disturbing. And Xander and Willow and Spike--what the hell was that?"

Some people's comments had a way of breaking the ice. Anya's tended to have a cooling effect on the atmosphere. Buffy felt everyone shrink a little into their own private dismay. Gazes shifted off
to the side, or down to the floor. She could feel memories pressing for attention, unbalancing the
certainties she'd held until now, about who she was, the shape of her life. Everyone else had to be
feeling the same. How were they going to come back from this, when they couldn't forget?

Which begged a question, now that she thought of it.

"So," she said hesitantly, "what do the Grauth remember, now that the spell is restored?"

Everyone wore uncertain expressions, except Angel, who wore none at all. "When this happened
before, the only ones who remembered were the people I cared about. That I was...close to. Fred
had a theory, something about nuclear force, mystical particles, gravitational bonds." He blinked.
"I didn't really follow it."

Giles, who'd taken a seat on a crate, removed his glasses and examined them as if they reflected his
thoughts. "If that holds true, I'd say we're very lucky."

"Oh very," Spike said, staring coldly at Buffy. His voice was tight. "Like winning the lottery."

She didn't understand his apparent anger and didn't intend to bring everything to a halt just to figure
it out. There were more immediate problems. "We can't let the wynariver fail again while Angel's
here," she said, as troubling thoughts caught up with her. "We'll have to get more rubies, have
back-ups ready--"

"Buffy." It was Angel, voice low. His was the one voice she didn't want to hear.

"We'll take turns keeping watch," she said, speaking over him. "Assign shifts."

"It won't work," he said, striking out her plan as if it were just empty talk. "It's too risky. Not just to
Sunnydale. I can't stay."

"What a shame," Spike said briskly. "Sorry to see you go. Had a nice party all planned. Funny hats.
Pinata."

Angel looked at Spike. Spike was the first to look away, mouth tightening, hands fisted in his
pockets.

"But you can stay a little longer, right?" Buffy couldn't step closer but she couldn't look at anyone
else either. For ten seconds he was the only thing in the universe. Lost again, found.

"A little longer," he said quietly.

She didn't look Spike's way at all. His eyes were pain, then darkness.

The End

Chapter End Notes
A cheat sheet for the identity shifts, if anyone wants one:

Spike => Buffy  
Buffy => Giles  
Xander => Angel  
Dawn => Xander  
Angel => Willow  
Any => Dawn  
Willow => Spike  
Giles => Tara  
Tara => Anya

If you're wondering why there are all these backstory references to Angel's condition that you don't remember seeing before...uh, yeah. I tend to adhere to crossover logic, where one show never goes into detail about the other show's current storyline. To try and counter the drawbacks of that I added as much exposition as humanly possible. It really was meant to be just a fun plot device, taking advantage of Angel's "guest starrage." I hope it works.

Feedback always welcome.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade), who has generously allowed me to post her fic to AO3.
Chapter Summary

Originally intended as a late noir story, and therefore picks up at some unspecified point after the previous chapter.

This is now the last installment of this "season" which remains unfinished.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Buffy watched from the shadows at the mouth of the alley as the officers strolled down the sidewalk, lurching slightly and singing in off-key, demonic chorus. Their boots scuffed the dirty snow as they moved together, arm in scaly arm.

"And the lady, she said to me / 'Grek, you ground his bones to chalk!' / And she grabbed my horns with glee / cried, 'Grek, I need your mighty--""

A scream ripped across the night, interrupting the song. The demons staggered to a halt a few yards past Buffy and peered around in confusion.

"Sounds like a wench in trouble," one said. He thrust out an arm to point down the street and overbalanced as a result, saved from falling only by the grasp of his companions. "We'll rescue her." He paused significantly, then hiccuped. "Then have dinner."

Buffy's mouth tightened in frustration and she clenched the stake in her pocket. This was all Spike's fault. If this street theater production of "'Tis a Pity She's a Snack" got any more graphic she would have to break cover. She peeked around the corner and saw, across the street, a disheveled young woman in a torn dress stumbling off the curb. As Buffy watched, the woman sobbed and skidded across a patch of ice, going down to her knees. Behind her, a vampire wearing enlisted grey and game face was laughing and waving a pink flag. It took Buffy a moment to realize this was the woman's shawl.

The officers crossed the street. "Here now," one called. "Where'd you get that, Private? You got papers? Cause if you don't, we're going to have to claim her, in the name--in the name of--""

"Straighten up, solider," another demon barked in careless interruption. "Salute your superiors." His authority was somewhat spoiled as he suddenly halted, bent almost double and retched into the snow. The vamp merely snarled in derision.

"No discipline these days," Buffy murmured to herself. "What is the army of hell fiends coming to?" Her breath puffed out frostily in a sigh.

She had squared her shoulders and pulled out her stake in reluctant preparation to attack when the group in the street abruptly fell silent, heads turning to watch the approach of someone--or something--to their left.

"Atten-SHUN," bellowed one demon, and the rest stiffened, even the vampire. On the ground, the woman cowered as if whatever neared exceeded her current nightmare.
"Well, well, what have we here?"

The voice was colder than the night air, sharp enough to skin flesh, and pitched to capture the rich, dark tone of blood in hollowed cheeks. Buffy felt her heart skip a beat. She drew back into the shadows again but not so far as to miss Spike's arrival. He shrugged his cloak back, folded his arms behind him and studied the group deliberately.

Enlisted grey and officer blue ducked their heads with respect before the black uniform of Reich Army Intelligence. The red armband denoting party membership drew Buffy's own attention for a grim moment before she lifted her gaze. But the bill of his hat obscured Spike's eyes, and she was too far away; all she could see of his face were the acute cheekbones and the set line of his mouth. Against the darkness of hat and uniform, his skin seemed ghostly white.

There was a space of several seconds in which he did not move or speak, and so no one moved or spoke, and the quality of that dead, still silence made Buffy tense again. Spike was looking over the other vamp, betraying nothing by the posture of his body.

"I'm told the mess hall serves a fine blood sausage," he said at last. His voice was soft, his words innocuous, but he exuded menace. Buffy's shoulders tightened as she was briefly folded in an Arctic chill. "So you shouldn't be needing to feed off the livestock, isn't that right, Private?"

The vamp lost game face immediately. "N-no, sir," he stammered. "I mean, yes, sir--"

"Shove off."

The vamp hurried away, and Spike turned his head, taking in the revelers. His measured tones did not rise as he said, "Carry her back to my quarters, tie her to the bed, and leave her. And if you spoil her in the slightest I'll cut the lot of you into ribbons and wear you on my hat."

The woman wailed and then fainted. With murmurs and twitches of obeisance, the demons lifted her between them and bore her away.

The street was left silent.

Buffy's heart accelerated again and she kept perfectly still, pressed to the wall of the alley, hidden by shadow. Except not. She saw his head lift, felt his eyes on her. The hairs on the back of her neck pricked as his head tilted slightly, as he inhaled scent into his airless lungs. Then his head ducked, his hands slipped into his pockets. Cigarettes were withdrawn, one mouthed, cupped, lit.

Spike surveyed the street both ways with apparent casualness, an aloof black figure standing straight as a streetlight on the glittering white snow, plumes of smoke drifting around his head. He was a perfect target. With one motion, Buffy could have arrowed her stake dead-center into his unbeating heart.

He ditched the cigarette with a precision of fingers she envied and strode directly toward her. He moved without the cockiness she'd grown used to, and without the deference. These days he walked the streets of Sunnydale arrogantly, fluid as a panther and as powerful in the eternal night.

He backed further into the alley and then he loomed, filling her vision. Their bodies slid together, bringing her relief. He drew her under his cloak as if feeling her cold. Her hands clasped his back, and his came up to cup her face. He wore leather gloves, which were completely unnecessary to him. Fetish gear, she called them.

He kissed her as if he'd forgotten what she tasted like. She kissed him the same way, though she could never forget.
"You're late," she breathed when they broke away. She tried to sound irate, but it came out pouty. Pouty-lipped, even.

One crooked finger stroked her cheek. "Sorry, love. These bloody demon hoedowns go on forever."

"If it had gone on any longer you'd have had a ho down here too."

"See the snarky Slayer," Spike drawled, one brow raised. "Nick of time'll do, won't it? I'm sure the lady was right glad I came along when I did." He sounded almost reproving. How wrong was that? Big faker.

"Uh-huh," Buffy said dryly. "She looked real happy to be headed for sheets of vamp. Speaking of which."

"Just gonna have a taste, pet--ow!" He winced at the kidney punch. She didn't know why. All his vampy organs were perfectly non-functional. Most of them.

"Only joking." He was smirking down at her now, but the smirk faded to seriousness. Not even Spike could sustain a smirk these days. And how sad was it that her every thought carried that mental tag: these days. "Better a few hours of terror and tremblin' in fear of me than becomin' a lunchable for that lot, I figure. Set her loose afterwards with a few coins jingling in her unmentionables."

"That better be all jingling in her...what I'm not going to mention." Buffy could feel Spike's right hand sliding down her body as she spoke, along the curve of one breast, down toward her own unmentionably aching...focus. "Stop that."

He leered with a charm she hated to admit, lips twitching, eyes gleaming under heavy lids. He'd take her right here against the wall if she let him. She gave him a little shove, but he caught her firmly around the waist and held her closer. Now his hand was back there and that was not all good--and not all bad. She groaned with exasperation, though quietly.

"Anyone walks by, we're just having a snog," he said, and then he kissed away any protest she might have given, cementing the charade that wasn't a charade. He was Mister Tongue tonight, she thought, and she wanted to resent the distraction but he was cold and slippery and sweet as ice cream inside her mouth. And distraction was good. It was all too good, these days. Before she knew it, she was pressed against the bricks, his hard body moving urgently against hers, his hands everywhere they should be.

"Buffy," he gasped between kisses, as if he'd needed breath for her name.

She managed to ease him off, soothe him. His hat had been knocked back from his forehead at a surprised and rakish angle. "I can't stay," she said. "I don't have time for this." She paused and watched him swallow words, a little shudder under the skin. Through his parted lips she saw a hint of fangs, but his face was nakedly human, nakedly needful; half sculpted in shadow, the other half washed white as soap in the street's light. "Neither do you."

He closed his eyes a moment. When they opened again, his gaze was shuttered. "Hard, innit." It was statement, not question. One corner of his lips moved in a small, rueful way that she didn't mistake for a smile.

She didn't back down, but she impulsively touched his face. "I miss you," she said simply. And he looked back at her, almost awed. That look melted her, but she didn't have time to melt.
She withdrew the caress and shoved both hands in her pockets. Clutched her stake as a reminder of who she was, which helped her remember why she was here, braving the street patrols in the early hours. "Were you able to get the plans?" she asked.

He stepped back and wordlessly removed his cigarettes, stuck another between his lips, lit it. She watched with growing impatience. "Smoke?" he asked her, holding out the pack. She rolled her eyes, but he kept holding it out with a long-suffering look. After a moment she blinked at the offering.

"Oh," she said. "Sure. Smoke." She took the pack from him, the wrapper crinkling against her fingers. "I'll just--I'll have one later. You know me. Always with the smoking. Bad, bad habit." She feigned a cough, then tucked the pack away.

"How's the Little Bit," Spike asked, taking a drag on his cigarette and glancing toward the street.

"Don't get me started." Buffy blew out a huff of air. "She never listens to me anymore. I turn my back two seconds and she's haring off into the tunnels to practice her archery on sewer rats. I'd collar and bell her except that would attract every demon within tinkling distance. And does she do her homework?" She collected herself from the rush of words and made a frowny face at him. "Look, see? You got me started."

"Maybe she doesn't do her homework cause she's got no home."

"Thank you, Doctor Joyce Vampire. Tell me something I don't know."

Spike squinted at her, tossed his cigarette, pulled his hat back into place. "She's a Summers. Got a head on her. Nothing you can do 'cept what you're doing. Keep a sharp watch, feed 'er vitamins and Victorian poetry while you're saving the world in your off hours."

Buffy looked down and tightened the belt of her coat absently. "I thought...when mom died, I told myself I'd take care of Dawn. Just like she would've. Wallop demons, wash the dishes. I thought, make a schedule. You're all set." She paused, the brightness of false optimism fading back to worry. "I promised her I'd take care of Dawn."

"And you do," Spike said firmly, grabbing her arms and dragging her attention up to him. "No call being so hard on yourself. Bloody tiresome, if you want to know the truth. If I wanted to spend my days with a brooding drama queen I'd be datin' Angel, wouldn't I?"

She slapped his chest, annoyed, but he just kissed her gently and then let her go. He looked terribly herolike and serious in his uniform, with the black brim of his hat shading his eyes. Like something from a history book. A part of her heart still compared Spike to Angel, and found him wanting--shorter in stature and in soul; all glittering, smirking surface, no depth. He could never live up to her first love. Die up?

And yet in nearly two years he'd given her no reason to distrust him, and every proof he could be counted on. She hated that. Hated when things changed, when people you'd trusted to behave one way pulled the rug out from under you. Fathers left, and watchers, and lovers; and mothers died. Friends grew up, turned gay, went all wacky in the head. Sisters popped out of nothingness and grew bratty roots in your heart.

And evil dead rotten fiendish bastards hung around and took care of you.

Spike was adjusting his coat, flexing his shoulders as he prepared to go. They had nothing more to say, and dallying was dangerous. Even so, he paused to stare deeply into her eyes a moment, his
feelings buried and unreadable there, then said, "Tell Harris I miss him something terrible and am countin' the days till I can see his puffy face again." He saluted and walked off jauntily, leaving Buffy smiling.

He could feel her smile warming his back as he walked away. It took a lot to walk away from her. Putting safe distance between them--that's the way to look at it, mate. You're a bloody hero, he reminded himself, the thought teetering ironically between gloom and puffery. It was a cold night, though, even for the unliving. Cold night, colder bed. And she'd had on that fuzzy sweater, blue with ribbons, which he'd salvaged from her house not long after the invasion and brought to her. That and a box of knick-knacks. Hairbrush, bits of frippery, stuffed animals. He remembered that scene with a wince: her eyes big and shiny with unshed tears, his own helplessness as he stood there holding the box out, shredded by the sight of her pain and feeling a right git, certain his gesture had done more harm than good.

Worn the sweater though, hadn't she. And tonight she'd been warm and soft under his hands; even through the damned gloves he could feel her. Wondering idly what color knickers she'd been wearing, Spike reached for a smoke, then realized he'd given over the pack. He stifled a curse.

Steam poured up from sidewalk grates, swirled aside by his passage. The street was deserted except for him and a couple of guardsmen patrolling for curfew violators. When they saw him, they swerved his way with intent to maim, but drew up short when their piggy little eyes focused on his stripes. The shorter of the two chopped his tusks together sharply and saluted before they moved on. Spike sketched a salute back with an expression of distaste they didn't see.

Sunnydale reminded him more and more of Berlin in the dark days, even to the occasional air raid--though the Volstag beasties made less of an impact than the Allies had, given they could only erupt out of their underworld ghetto at certain times of the lunar cycle. They'd had a chance tonight, but so far the skies remained clear. As the hotel where he resided came into view, Spike could see the faint blue shimmer of magical shielding holding steady.

In the windows overlooking the street one curtain twitched; Spike glimpsed it from below as he walked by. He was still a block from his hotel. He shot a glance sideways at the building. The Sunnydale Arms. Cheap apartments. Caldarths demons living there now. Sleepless. Filthy lot, too. Leaving skins like rotten banana peels in the halls, bringing down property values. No danger. Curious buggers, that's all.

Curious.

Spike casually crossed the street, turned the corner and doubled back along the rear alley of the block. He scouted the alley with care, heard nothing. Felt no presence. At the service entrance of the apartment building, he swung himself up onto the fire escape and climbed light-footedly to the third floor, then let himself in a window. The hallway stank of shed skin and had the peculiar emptiness of a building whose rat population had met genocide on hors d'oeuvre trays.

From the nearest apartment came the recorded tinkle of a piano and some baby-voiced bint he recalled from the thirties singing, "Love is good for anything that ails you..."
"Bleedin' nostalgia," Spike muttered. "Must be puttin' in the water with the fluoride." He ghosted down the corridor, took a turn, and grabbed the nearest thing that moved. It squeaked in alarm. "Hey, hey, hey--" The demon tried to pull away but Spike's grip tightened. Its pink skin went pinker with distress, casting a faint electrical glow into the darkness of the hall. Patches of damp pink skin were barely visible, surfacing from the otherwise lumpy shadows of the creature's face and form.

"Shandy. Thought I recollected you lived here now." Spike smiled in a nasty way.

"Spike. I-it's good to see you."

"Course it is. Couldn't have missed me, keeping an eye out like that. Six of 'em, even."

Shandy gurgled what passed for a nervous laugh. "No, no. A complete mistake. Just getting some fresh air."

"You a huffer, then? Dangerous habit, that. Hear that fresh air'll strip pores raw on your sort, get the slime ducts--" Spike paused. "Slimin'."

"Ha ha, yes. I should turn in now." The demon made another effort to slip Spike's grasp.

"You'll turn into a messy stain on the floor if you don't tell me who's got you on sentry duty."

Half of Shandy's eyes closed; the other half twitched with tics. "Okay, okay." His whispery voice lowered to a resigned breath, barely audible beyond a vampire's ears. "It's the General."

Spike let go of Shandy's arm. "Nilec."

"He wants to know when you come, when you go."

"Does he." The wheels of thought sped distractingly, and Spike barely noticed as Shandy began edging away. Then his hand shot out and closed around the demon's throat. Its moist jowls hung heavily around his wrist, brushing the pristine cuff. Spike tilted his head, sliding into game face.

"Now, now. Don't run off." Teeth bared themselves in a sharpening smile. "We've got things to talk about."

Buffy whistled a few bars of "Camptown Races" as she passed the sentry point by the west tunnel entrance. A tinny warble floated down to her from the treetops.

"So not a whip-poor-will, Xander," she said under her breath.

Inside, Tracey or Stacey--or maybe Tacey--was guarding the entrance, very Private Benjamin chic in her olive-green jumpsuit and accessorized automatic weaponry. Buffy nodded at her as she started to pass and stopped short as the gun descended like the gateway thingy in a parking garage to bar entry.

"Password," said the girl.

"What? Oh." Buffy searched her memory. She'd been listening during the evening briefing. She
really had. Dawn had chosen the password, she recalled. "Um. Joey?" The girl shook her head once. "Lance. JC. Justin. Damn it." She almost stomped her foot with frustration. "Chris!" Tacey Stacey Tracey stared at her stonily. "Oh, come on," Buffy pleaded, taking a shot, "...Tracey?"

"I was told to make no exceptions," said Tracey, whose girl power had clearly gone to her head. She lifted her chin slightly. "For all I know you could be a robot--or, inhabited by a rogue slayer, or manifesting the attributes of a demon."

"You could have just stopped at robot. And what is this--is my whole life story a Dark Horse comic now? Oh, oh--Howie. Howie. Ha!" The chica grudgingly lowered her gun to let Buffy enter, and okay, maybe she'd relished that ha a little too much. After all, the girl was only doing her duty.

Buffy felt that positive feedback was called for. "Great, great job, with the whole passwording thing." She nodded smartly. "Very unbudging of you. Keep up the good work." And now I will take my obnoxious perkiness off, thought Buffy, turning on her heel and descending into the sewers.

She had to turn on her flashlight after a few yards. They needed a budget for safety lights, she thought. Rebels all over the world could get funding. Why, there was probably some six-man cell of grungy militant sheep-herders in West Nowhere getting American money for missiles right now--so why shouldn't they? They were a scrappy band of freedom fighters, battling the armies of darkness hell-bent on taking over the earthly dimension. If that wasn't the best pitch ever for financial relief and maybe some of those Red Cross goodie bags, she didn't know what was.

"Ewww," she said, stepping on something that squished. She made a face at her once trendy boots-less shiny with every passing day--compared herself unfavorably with Rebel Barbie, then sighed and headed to the command center. A quarter mile north, turn right at the stinky drain, fifty paces, through the big broken hole in the wall and into the bat caves. Abandoned sewer tunnels, mine shafts, natural caves, passages left by giant worms boring through the earth--even with a history of subterranean slayage, Buffy had never realized before the invasion just how extensive the network of tunnels under Sunnydale was. It was a wonder the town didn't collapse into a big hole after a heavy rain.

Inside the dimly-lit cavern they'd recently colonized, she wound her way through shelves and cots and stacks of crates and into the control room where a poster of Britney Spears gazed down inspirationally over their oh-so-commandy command table, on which lay a tattered map of Sunnydale, a battle axe, and...pie.

"Ooh, cherry?" she asked.

"Strawberry-rhubarb," said Dawn, before shoving half a slice into her mouth.

"Oh," said Buffy brightly, trying to sound enthused and not at all ungrateful. "Yum. Who got us pie?"

"Depeche Mode took down a supply transport," said Willow, wiping a red smoodge from her mouth almost guiltily.

"That's demon pie?" Buffy said with alarm. "Willow!"

"Actually, it's Mrs. Friendly's," said Tara. "See?" She held up the box reassuringly.

"But--guys, come on. Even I know you can't just go around grabbing strange pies off strange trucks!"
Willow looked at Dawn, who looked back and then looked over to Tara, who looked back at Dawn and then to Willow.

"Why not?" asked Willow gamely.

"Trojan pies?" Buffy said, eyes wide, eyebrows raised with a big fat *hello*? that none of them were heeding.

"Trojan pies," repeated Tara in her careful way, looking at the others again. Dawn smirked.

"There could be a spell on them. The Reich could have known we'd hit that truck."

"I think it was spur of the moment, Buffy. Truck. Pies. A happy coincidence and then a happy dessert." Willow smiled, and not that Willow was condescending, because a good friend would never be that, but then why did Buffy want to poke that smile off her face? "And see--the Orb of Thaeron didn't change color. No witchiness. Well, except for the witchiness that is us."

Buffy frowned at the clear orb sitting like a centerpiece on the table. "Fine. But if your tongues swell up and grow all pointy like porcupines don't come crying to me is all I'm saying." Privately she vowed to have a little talk with Jason about spur-of-the-moment raids on enemy pies. She would play Buffy, the Highly Intimidating Slayer.

She slid her coat off and sat down at the table with the others, suddenly feeling her tiredness and elbowing herself into a slump. Almost immediately she straightened up again. Tireless leader, that was her. An inspiration to the forces. Just like Britney.

"How's your batty boyfriend?"

Buffy gave Dawn the look. "Someday--when you outgrown puns?--I will allow you to rejoin the civilized world," she promised dryly.

Tara smiled then quickly asked, "Was he able to get the plans?"

Oh, duh, thought Buffy. God, she was more tired than she'd realized. She grabbed her coat from the bench and pulled out the cigarettes. "Yep. And hey, they're mentholated, too."

"For that cool minty sensation," said Willow in a jolly way, then glanced aside at Dawn, whose head was bowed over her pie. "Not that it's cool to smoke. Because, so not cool. Nope." She shot a glance at Buffy, then went back to eating her own pie as if totally absorbed by a mental conversation with the pastry. Dawn looked up, clearly checking the Buffy-weather, then ducked her head again.

Okay, what was *that*, thought Buffy. She sensed she'd be having a certain big-sisterly chat. But later. And maybe with Willow.

"Was it a big risk--getting the plans?" asked Tara.

Buffy slewed her attention back to the matter at hand. "What? Oh, no. Not really." She blinked. "There was a demon patrol on State street, but I was able to use my slayer slipperiness to avoid them."

"Did you take to the rooftops like a cat and slink fluidly through the shadows and then leap to safety over the snow-covered shingles, narrowly avoiding a crunchy plummet to the ice-covered street below?" asked Willow. A gleam of hopeful excitement lit her eyes.
Buffy stared for a moment, eyebrows levered, lips parted for a fresh breath of whoa. "Okay, first, no. And second, we really need to get cable down here."

"Um," broke in Tara gently. "That's really good, Buffy--that you were, you know, able to avoid the crunchy plummet. But I was actually wondering if it was risky for Spike." She sounded a bit apologetic, but it was the barest trace of her old manner. Mostly she sounded like she cared. "I mean, stealing the plans from that colonel's study had to be kind of dangerous."

"Oh," said Buffy, her thoughts grinding to a halt. Spike. "I didn't ask." Spike. Abruptly she wanted nothing better than to run back out into the cold night, find his cold body and throw herself into his arms, say stupid girlish things.

I love the undead, she thought. My bright future is Jerry Springer and years of therapy. If I live through this week.

"Buffy?"

God, when did I start loving him? When did I stop fighting and start toting around this bottle-blond, pulse-challenged action figure with his leather and sneers and cigarette breath--when did he stop being my demon lover and start being my demon--

"Buffy?"

--everything.

"Oh my god," she said aloud.

"Buffy, what is it?" Willow stared at her, concern in her furrowed brow.

"What?" She snapped alert at the tone of her friend's voice. "What what?"

"You said, 'Oh my god,' and then you looked sick, like that time you ate all those pickled eggs."

Everyone was staring at her. She stared back, head swiveling in nervous fractions. "I'm fine. Fine. I just...had a thought. A bad thought." She blinked, said the first thing that popped into her head. "Overdue library book. Just remembered it. Three years ago, American History. Boy. When this whole invasion thing is over, that book's going right back."

"Buffy--"

"Sorry." She stood up and pulled on her coat. "I have to go out again."

"For the library book," said Dawn in a heavily skeptical voice.

"No, just out. Fresh air. Clear my head." She looked down at their worried faces, managed a smile. "It's all good. I'll leap over the rooftops like a cat; and I remember the password even. It's--" Her mind blanked.

"Howie," said Dawn.

"Right. Howie."

Buffy retraced her steps back to the surface of the earth, leaving the subterranean reek behind with a sense of relief. Her guilt reflex kicked in as she thought of her friends left to hold the fort in the most literal sense, but she kicked back hard. She kicked guilt's ass and knocked it flat.
Once outside though, she simply stood by the tunnel entrance and inhaled the crisp air, hands in pockets, making no move to return to town. Going to Spike's rooms could lead to their discovery, could get them both the wrong kind of dead. It would be selfish, stupid and...stupid. Telling herself that didn't help a whole lot.

The stars glittered in the dark sky with a clarity that made Sunnydale's eternal night appear almost normal. A few hours and the sun would come up, hidden behind a density of magical clouds. Mist would roll across the fields, small rainstorms would pepper the ground, and vampy types would stroll freely through the streets of her town, shopping for shoes and sipping blood-laced cappuccinos bought from demon baristas.

An insistent trill penetrated her thoughts and Buffy looked up at the Xander tree. She couldn't see him through the leaves, leaves that should have withered a long time ago but hadn't. She walked over and tipped her head back to look up into the branches. Xander peered down at her from where he sat cross-legged on the shored-up remnants of some kid's tree house. The leafy shadows flickered across his face, wind and moonlight, and she shivered at a darkness in his expression that she rarely saw. Then he smiled and with a poof Darth Xander became Dork Xander.

"Buff. Buffster. The Buffman."

"Buffwoman, I think you mean." Thank you very much, her tone said.

He raised one hand from the gun resting across his lap, directed an admonishing finger her way. "Never mess with a classic riff. The riff is all. The riff comforts us."

Buffy smiled wryly, then climbed up boards nailed to the trunk to join him.

"Enter, enter." Xander scooted to one side, making room. "Mi tree casa es su tree casa."

She mirrored his position, leaning against a heavy branch. The bark was cool but solid against her back. "It's nice up here," she said, looking around in surprise. There was a small cooler with a folded blanket on top, and additional weapons hung on nails from the branches. "Cozy."

"The life of the bandito is not cozy, nor is his lair. His is a rugged, manly, lonely existence." He paused with momentary drama. "And so is his lair."

Buffy's lips curled in amusement. "I'll remember that."

"So what's up tonight. You're in, you're out, you're up a tree." He gazed at her steadily, face mild but not entirely without challenge.

"Oh. Just. You know." She shrugged one shoulder. "Hard to breathe down there sometimes."

"No kidding. Living in sewers gives a whole new meaning to the suburban lifestyle."

"Yeah." She tilted her head, moved by wistfulness. "I miss my bed."

"I miss my fridge."

"TV."

"TV," Xander echoed with feeling.

"Air-popper."

"Bathtub."
"Mmm. My Waterpik." Xander stared at her with lifted brows and fascination until she noticed and blushed. "It's perfectly therapeutic."

"You're forgetting. I have a plain-speaking ex-demon girlfriend. I have been made privy to the secrets of the harem."

"Speaking of--how is your undercover angel?" asked Buffy, redirecting the conversation.

Xander looked out through the leaves and didn't answer. He was still, but his fingers moved in brief restlessness across the gun.

Buffy dropped her gaze and picked at the laces of her boots. "You miss her," she said quietly after a few moments had passed.

"I miss her more than I'd miss my spleen. You can live without your spleen."

She cut her eyes up and considered his profile. He was broody. She recognized broody from the mirror.

The leaves rustled in the wind and quietness.

After a minute, Buffy decided the conversation was over; her muscles tensed in preparation to rise and leave Xander to his rugged, manly, lonely existence.

"So," Xander said, turning his head back her way. He looked more tired than he had before. She sometimes had that effect on people; or so she worried. "How's your own undercover..." He trailed off, then flexed his shoulders as if to say he could find no other word: "Devil." Still a lot of casual loathing there, check.

"Good," she said tersely.

"Hasn't made the firing squad yet?" Concern masked a mockery so deep he probably didn't even know he was doing it. "Hasn't been gutted, flayed, knifed--strung up?"

Buffy lowered her eyes. "No."

There was another awkward pause, and when she glanced at him his eyes gleamed in the dark and made her skin prickle. His expression was unrepentant, lips slightly parted as if he relished his own hatred. She couldn't remember the last time he'd been given reason to hate Spike, but then he'd never really warmed to Angel either. It was a vamp thing for Xander, and as always in the face of his low-key needling she didn't know whether to feel angry or guilty, so she felt both.

"I should go."

"Going back to him?"

Heat flared in her face, burned her ears, but her voice ran cold. "That's really none of your business, is it." She couldn't stand up in the cramped tree house, it was absurd, but she did anyway, and Xander rose as well. "God, I thought we were past this. Haven't we done this little scene of yours, like, a thousand times?"

"Yeah, well. See, I have this thing. I care about my friends. Crazy, isn't it." He mocked her now, as gently and hurtfully as a brother. "And I happen to think you deserve better than a monster." He stared at her, head cocked, then made a sound, less a laugh than a bit of sandpaper rubbing across her nerves. "But you don't want to hear that, do you."
"Frankly? No." She turned to descend the ladder, but he grabbed her arm.

"Buffy."

She drew on impatience as defense. "What?"

He hesitated, searching her eyes, then said, "It's dangerous in town. Going in when you don't have to is stupid." He shoved a lot of emphasis into the last word.

Buffy considered him, the grip of his hand on her arm like a tether to sanity. She forced herself to relax. Stand down. "You're right," she sighed. "It's late. And if I recall, the last entry on the Slayer's Tuesday to-do list involves one seventeen year old, math homework, and a red pencil."

Xander squeezed her arm. "Tell the Dawnster from me that algebra will save the world." He blinked and shook his head as disbelief washed over his face. "I can't believe I just said that. I lie the lie of the big adults now."

She smiled wryly. "Don't we all."

Back inside the tunnels, Buffy cut left instead of right and jogged along the corridors until she reached one of the southern exits. She climbed one of the maintenance ladders, slid a manhole aside, and let herself out in the alley behind Schraeder's Grocery. A sentry melted out of the shadows and she recognized him as Andrew. He helped her replace the manhole cover.

"What are you doing on the surface?" she asked, huffing white air as the cover slid quietly back into place under their combined efforts.

"Uh, sorry." The redhead rubbed hair off his face and pushed back his cap, and at the gesture Buffy thought helplessly of Spike. "Stinks down there."

"Cold up here," Buffy parried. "And you'll have some angry little Wiccas on your ass...sault weapon if they find you off position. What did we learn in training? Inside, hear noise, run fast. Outside, hear noise, get eaten."

"I know." Andrew looked at her with the look she'd come to recognize as goopy-boy-crush. "Thanks, Slayer, Buffy. I'll, uh, go back in." Then a thought struck him. It was like watching a bird hit a windowpane. He swung his weapon off his shoulder and handled it in a way that made her faintly nervous. "You want I should watch your back on this one?"

"One what?"

"This mission," he said, his whisper descending to intimacy.

"I think I can handle this one--"

"Because I'm ready, I'm primed," he went on eagerly. "I'm frosty."

"Yes." Buffy's brows raised. "Because it's twenty degrees out, Andrew."
"No, I mean--" He broke off, laughed. "That's funny."

Buffy felt that junior high might not be a memory but a recurring nightmare. She smiled, spoke clearly. "I have to go now."

"Oh. Okay. Bye!"

Half turned to leave, she flinched and turned back. "Andrew," she whispered. "Shhh. We don't like to cry out, 'Snack! Snack!' to the creatures of the night."

"Right," he whispered, giving her the thumbs up and a brilliant smile.

She had to smile in return, and then she turned again and rolled her eyes.

Spike kicked the door in, right out of Benny's hand. He spared his demon manservant a brief and suspicious squint, a flicking gaze down waistcoat and trousers. Had to make sure the fellow was keeping himself tidy. Went with his whole image, having a presentable little twit on retainer.

"Cloak, sir--"

Spike was already shrugging his cloak off to drop to the floor, or would have been except the handy bastard caught and hung it on the mahogany hall stand. Spike paused at the gleaming table on which his mail lay, felt his hat deftly removed from his head, from behind and without comment.

"Coat, sir."

Spike grunted and didn't look up from shuffling his handful of mail as the Hanomag removed his coat. He held up his right arm, transferred his mail from one hand to the other, let the coat be slipped off his left, returned to an idle scan of the addresses. Most of them, he could tell all he needed to from the envelopes alone. White cream, wax seal, a scent of rotting flowers: invite to another sodding ball. Ball, ball, interrogation, ball.

Absently, Spike picked up a glass of brandy from the silver tray and killed it in two swallows. Had a forty-proof blood taste to it that warmed the cockles. He smacked the cut crystal back onto the silver, and left his hand there, spidered over the glass. Warmth was uncurling in his gut but something was wrong.

"Another drink, sir?"

"Something not right here." Spike let go of the glass and turned in a semi-circle, looking around the small foyer. "Off." He assessed the softly ticking clock, the poncey oil paintings, the lamp and its muted glow, before narrowing his gaze on Benny. Benny looked down wordlessly, then up again, then down again. Blinking, Spike followed his gaze to the glossy black-and-white tiles. Bare tiles. Yes. That was it. That nice cushiony feeling under his shoes he was used to--

"What the hell happened to my sodding rug? Real Persian, that was."

"Unfortunately, sir, the sodding rug became...sodden. A unexpected delivery today. Balloon slugs.
No courier and, alas, no note."

It was only then that Spike finally noticed the bite marks all over the demon's face. Hard to make them out against the rough, brick-red skin. "Looks like you had a tussle."

"Sir," Benny agreed. "I had to wrestle them to the ground. And--"

"Squash 'em flat," Spike finished with a wince.

"Quite. The rug has been sent out for cleaning. A reputable firm."

"No note," Spike gave a terse laugh as he matched the style of the prank to its source. "Know who that was. Hrarffahr. Bloke's hasty calling in his poker debts and fancies he has a sense of humor. Bad combination."

"Balloon slugs are not dangerous. To my kind."

Spike raised his brows at the meaningful tone of voice.

"If they attach themselves to a vampire they can drain one dry in under a minute." Benny paused, no expression breaking through the brick. "Or so I have been told, sir."

"Hell," said Spike with feeling and astonishment. He gave it a moment's serious contemplation in connection with Nilec, then straightened and dismissed the assassination attempt with a one-shouldered shrug. "Oh, well. Man doesn't have enemies, he's no kind of man."

He turned and entered his sitting room. Fire crackling, comfy chair. He removed his uniform jacket and flung it at a settee, then dropped into the armchair, propped his feet up, and started tearing open envelopes, casting each carelessly aside as he did and finding what intrigue and amusement he could in the feminine scrawls.

"'Dear Colonel,'" he read aloud to himself in a light sing-song, "'please do not think me forward but I'm advised by a dear friend that you would enjoy an evening of fine music and company. My protegee will be playing the works of Iannis Xenakis--' Bludgeoning the guests to death'd be more honest." Spike skimmed the card into the fire, returned to reading.

After a while he glanced to the side table and frowned. By now a second glass should have been sitting on the table, this one of blood. "Oy, you blasted--" he began, then cut his yell short with an oath as the demon materialized at his side.

"Sir."

Spike glared, tilted his head in subtle warning. "Dinner'd be nice." You oily-hoofed git.

"Dinner was delivered earlier and is waiting in the bedroom, sir."

"Wha--oh." He gave the demon an annoyed look. "That's not dinner." Which you well know, his tone reminded.

"As I've mentioned before, sir, I'd certainly be glad to assist--"

"No," Spike said, more fiercely than he'd meant to. Temptation made him angry; the sting of old humiliations made him savage. Standing, he loomed over his servant. "Get helpful and I'll skin you for it. Twice." He stalked into the bedroom where the girl lay tied up on his eiderdown, asleep. Drained by fear, likely. He shut the door behind him and moved to the bed, eyeballing her.
Overripe, dark hair, buttonish nose. His gaze fixed on her plump neck, all white and soft. Like a marshmallow, even. And he'd wager it was as sweet. At that moment he felt he'd give his right arm for just one...small...snack.

Spike turned abruptly away, ran a hand over his head. "Like a cat fed from a tin," he muttered. "Live mice nipping at my bloody tail, playing jumpsies." Furious, he kicked a hole in his dresser. Boot lodged in the shattered wood, he cursed. Yanked it out, and then with a tightening mouth put his fist deliberately through the wall. Once, twice, three times. Felt good. Game faced, he seethed. And then, snarling as the plaster dust settled, he began to methodically destroy his room.

Buffy's heel slipped on the snowy roof and she yelped as she fell flat, grabbing a ventilation pipe just in time to keep from sliding into the icy street below.

"Like a cat," she muttered ironically to herself, breathless and glad no one could see her. She pulled herself up one-handed and swung a leg over the roof's peak. "Whoof," she said, eyes widening a moment as the cold shingly roof made itself intimate. Then she jumped upright and dusted off her coat and pants. Across the narrow alley she could see the fourth-floor windows of the Hotel Arcadia. Room interiors glowed through sheer white drapes, and she counted the windows east to west under her breath.

"Right," she said, craning her neck to peek over the edge of the roof and then pulling back. "Just fifty feet down. No problem. Hello, kitty."

Thus bolstered in confidence, Buffy backed up several paces, eyed the two-foot ledge that was her target, then bounded across the slippery roofline. As she leapt through space all she could think was, what the hell am I do--, but before she could complete the idea she smacked up against the bricks and had to grab quickly for purchase.

She stayed there a minute, catching her breath and reknitting her nerve, then picked her way carefully along the ledge which was luckily without snow. Ahead of her she could see the stripe of light from Spike's window, painted yellow against the shadowed concrete. From inside the room came a tinkle and a small crash.

Buffy shimmied up to the recessed window and peered around the edge. The gauzed drapes were so thin she could see through easily. Nice room, she thought. Or it would have been if someone who was probably her hot-headed boyfriend hadn't trashed it. What looked like nicely faked antique furniture lay wrecked and scattered, chairs tipped over with their arms ripped off, tables smashed. As she skated her gaze across the room, Spike strode into view with game face on, ripping a canvas painting to shreds and mouthing something she didn't think was art appreciation.

It was cold and she was about to enter, but instead she froze, breath halting in her chest as Spike dragged a girl off his bed. He gripped her wrist, on which a piece of torn rope dangled. She was crying and cringing from him--it was the girl from the street, Buffy suddenly recognized. Will paralyzed, she watched in rising anguish as Spike grabbed the girl's hair and tipped her head back. He held her upright with one hand and stroked her hair with the other, ignoring the ineffectual blows she tattooed on his chest. Buffy didn't move. She could be through that window in two seconds, stake out, but she couldn't move--
Spike tossed the girl back on the bed and lowered his face into his hands. He stood there a minute while the girl sobbed; while Buffy gripped brick hard enough for it to crumble unnoticed. When he raised his face from his hands, it was stripped of demon and she saw that he'd been sobbing too. Buffy's heart ached so hard, so suddenly, it was as if it had stopped beating and only just started again.

She remained on the ledge as Spike eased the girl off the bed and from the room, manhandling her with care as she became more violent. She heard him yell something that sounded like penny. The bedroom door opened almost at once and a bright red demon met Spike on the threshold and took the struggling girl from him. Comments were exchanged before Spike banged the door shut behind them and turned to face his room.

Buffy paused one more moment to watch him survey the wreckage, but when he picked up a broken table leg she hastily kicked in the window and hopped inside. He stared at her, amazed and blinking, while she walked over and took the splintered wood from his hand. She threw it to one side where it landed on the capsized deck of a dresser. They both watched as it promptly rolled off and bounced on the floor.

"Way to slay the dresser," said Buffy. "In fact, a fine job all around," she added brightly. "Any particular reason your place looks like Billy Idol's hotel suite after a bad show, or is it always like this?"

"What are you doing here?" asked Spike. His voice was harsh and low, and his eyes burned with barely banked fury. She'd seen that look before, and not just in his eyes. She reached up a hand to stroke a tear from his face, but he turned away and did it himself, roughly.

The violence coiled in him would have made her hesitate another time, but she'd seen his hard-won self-control and she felt only normal slayer wariness. She looked around at the closest debris and absently righted a chair. Tried to. It tipped and she caught it. She let go. It tipped and she caught it. She let it fall with a sigh.

When she looked up Spike was watching her, broody, mouth a tight line. "What," he repeated slowly and distinctly, "are you doing here? Come to spy on me? Catch your pet vampire having a crisis of faith over the dinner menu?" His voice was so dark it could have eclipsed the sun. "Hope you had a good laugh. Should've jumped in sooner though, love; staked me yourself."

"Shut up!" Buffy cried. She'd have smacked him if he'd been three feet closer.

The outburst, its lameness, seemed to take them both by surprise. They stared at each other, and then Spike's jaw twitched and he slowly uncurled a reluctant smile, ducking his head to one side as he looked away from her, ironical in his amusement. And then his gaze came back, striking her like a snake, making her heart skip, and there he was up against her, equally fast and...snakey. He held her tightly around the waist and tipped her head back with his free hand. Buffy realized she was in almost the same position as the girl had been, and shuddered with sudden heat. Non-slayer instincts kicked in, and she arched her neck back further. She could feel Spike hardening against her, his arm tightening against her lower back.

See me with the swooning, Buffy thought, but then the seriousness of his need cut through her own dazed longing like a knife. He'd vamped out, and was looking at her neck with glowy-eyed hunger and bared fangs. His hand cradled the back of her head and felt better than a pillow. She could rest there. She closed her eyes.

"Drink," she whispered and then gasped as his fangs buried themselves in her neck without hesitation, breaking like a shriek through her skin and mind, a shriek she didn't make aloud. And
oh god it was so good, so incredibly wrong and good that she clawed at his back and ripped his
shirt and didn't care and rubbed against him with her entire life as he jacked her up higher to ride
his thigh and then frantically, frantically she was sucking in breaths as he drank. From the fangs
hooked in her throat a line ran down to a knot of exquisite pain between her legs, tightening further
and further until the line snapped and a blossoming heat made her cry out and he tore away.

"Buffy!"

"Oh," she said weakly, swaying in his arms. "Hello, kitty."

He made a noise she couldn't decipher, and then she felt herself lifted in strong arms and carried.
His bed was comfy at her back when he laid her down.

"Nice mattress," she murmured, opening her eyes. He sat next to her, devamped. Concern was
showing in his naked face, or maybe fear.

"You all right?" He touched her hair, and she could feel that his hand trembled. "Bloody hell,
Slayer." He sounded as if he'd been about to say more but his voice choked off.

"Relax." She was dizzy, but after eight years of slaying she was well accustomed to measuring
blood loss and knew she'd be fine. "I can spare a pint."

"And a half, love," Spike said, still caressing her tenderly. "That's not the point."

"Get me some water?" Buffy asked, just to get him out of her hair. He jumped up at once and sped
from the room on this valiant and watery quest. When he was gone, she sat up carefully and
removed her coat and boots. She rubbed the already clotted wound on her neck, prodding to
determine how sore it would be and how visible. Though she already knew. "Big hickey," she said.

Spike returned with water, which she gave a perfunctory sip before setting on the bedside table.
Doing these small things kept her from having to focus on him, on how he stood awkwardly and at
a loss in front of her, shifting from foot to foot. She hoped he wasn't going to want to talk. It wasn't
pretty, when they did the talking thing. When there was something to talk about.

"You just gonna stand there and dance with yourself?" Buffy asked with a stab at archness, sparing
him a glance at last. He was still wound up, muscles tense. If he'd been anyone else, anyone alive,
she'd have guessed from his expression that he was angry at himself. She was a realist, though, and
he was rebel without a conscience man. Spike cared about her, sure. That didn't mean he wasn't
jonesing for a chaser.

He uttered a short laugh and shook his head. His eyes had filled with wonderment, but his face held
unresolved worry. "Oh, you're a mad bird, you are. Give Dru a run for her money, I sus--" He
squawked as she yanked his belt and threw him on the bed. Bouncy mattress.

"This mattress is--is better than all things chocolate," she said, turning and stretching out against
the headboard. "I find this grossly unfair. Do you know I'm sleeping on burlap?"

Spike rolled onto his side and propped his head up with one hand. The other stroked her feet
lightly. "Didn't know that, pet. Chafes, does it?"

"Mmm. Dunno. I'm not really sleeping on burlap."

He smiled, and then shoved up next to her. They lay side by side, face to face. He played her ribs
as if tickling piano keys. She unbuttoned his shirt, in no hurry.
"Don't have to be so careful. You've ventilated the silk."

Buffy tore the shirt down the middle and palmed his chest and Spike did that thing he did, which looked like he was taking a deep breath. *Old habits die hard, he'd once told her, even when the rest goes easy.*

"I can't stay the night," she said.

"Day, you mean. Nearly sunrise."

"Then we'd better make this fast." But her fingers were slow again, and he didn't make a move.

"Risky as hell, your comin' here. For both of us."

She met his eyes. "I know," she said quietly. She gave a small smile, and to distract them both from the real risks said, "You should've seen my feline leap across the snowy rooftops."

Spike raised a brow and glanced past her toward the window whose draft she could feel against her back. "Bloody hell," he said, then glared at her. "Well, you'll not be leaving that way."

"Have to smuggle you out. Take the freight elevator. There's a tunnel leadin' out the cellar. Used it a coupla times myself."

"Know your escape routes," Buffy affirmed lazily. Tired of talking, she pushed Spike onto his back and rolled on top of him. He held her hips obligingly while she shifted. She had his full attention now, and wished she were wearing a skirt. The breeze from the window was chilly and zippers were complicated. She yanked down his, though, and rotated herself against him as if buffing a floor. His fingers tightened and she teased him like this for a minute, but her own breath hitched as the rhythm picked up, and next thing she knew she was on her back and his cold hands were sliding her jeans and panties off. He left her sweater on.

It was cold, she was cold, but his head dipped between her thighs and she forgot to notice, and a hazy while later after cries and hair-tossing and arching, Spike slithered up again, checking a path up her belly and breasts until his face loomed above hers. His cheeks were flushed. That was her blood, she thought. Her blood from before, warming his dead skin.

"Tell me how evil I am," he breathed. "I'm evil, aren't I, love?" Desperation laced his voice, and with it a new hunger.

"The evilist."

He thrust into her and she lifted to meet him. "Oh god," he said, the cords of his neck thick with effort, his voice tight.

She buzzed beneath him as he rode her. He was like music only she could hear. When he moved inside her, he wrecked himself and she grew reckless. He watched her like a hawk, focused completely on her, eyes burning into hers as if he didn't know whether to hate or love her, slaying her with every thrust. She came twice, seizing him, and then his eyelids fluttered shut and his chin lifted, and he was gone, the way all men eventually left, disappearing somewhere else at the important moment.

He groaned and half-collapsed on her, nuzzling his face against hers. She stroked the tatters of his shirt, and his belt clinked as he drew away. After he slid off they lay together side by side on their backs for a few minutes, limbs splayed bonelessly.

Dinner and a tumble, Buffy thought, sitting up at last and reaching for her jeans. Spike too had
gotten up from the bed, his own trousers zipped. He wandered through the debris of his room, hunting for something, bent down and drew an undamaged enameled box from a pile of wood that was once chair, opened it with a grunt of surprise and removed a cigarette. The lighter hunt looked to last quite a while longer.

When she was dressed again, boots and coat on, and he was standing, cigarette lit and smoking in one white hand, they stood at opposite sides of the room and didn't look at each other. Buffy wasn't sure what dead boy was thinking, but the ache in her chest was familiar: a twist of meaningless happiness; longing and hope. All the wrong things to feel, but she couldn't stop feeling. Or maybe they weren't the wrong things to feel; she wasn't sure anymore. Angel, Riley, Spike--it was just one lost boy after another ever since pulling on her little red slayerhood. She couldn't remember any more what was normal and what wasn't. She and Spike--they fought together and occasionally still fought each other, and if she kept her eyes on the epic drama of good against evil she could sometimes kick free of the aching undertow of her feelings for him. Which was probably for the--

"Best be going, then," said Spike, looking around for a place to put out his cigarette and then mashing it out in the shards of a lamp. He met her eyes. "Fore the breakfast service begins and the hallways fill up with--"

"Spike."

He stopped, waiting for her to go on. He looked almost polite.

She took a deep breath, then ducked her head. "Nothing."

"Right then."

With a warning to quietness, he led her out through the apartment. Buffy glanced around as she passed, impressed and annoyed by the deep rugs, the deep fireplace, the deep sofa. He had the whole deep thing going for him.

"This undercover gig isn't exactly a hardship, is it," she groused.

Spike turned his head and smirked unnicely. "Tables've turned, haven't they? Gettin' a taste of life underground. Everyone up above got the big-screen telly, the well-stocked fridge, while you scurry through their sewers and eat scraps."

"Well, tonight we had pie," she shot back, unable to think of a more suitable retort.

"Bully for you." He paused at the front door, first to pull on his coat, then to scrutinize her. "Here," he said, taking his cloak off a hook to wrap around her shoulders. "Wear this. Put the hood up if you're in the open." His brow did the wrinkly worry thing, which she liked better than the wrinkly vamp thing. "I should come with, make sure you get home safe."

"No," she said firmly. "Now let's go."

The halls were deserted, the freight elevator not in use, and they descended unspeaking to the basement, where Spike held her back briefly with one arm and poked his head out to make sure no one was around. They wound through what appeared to be abandoned subkitchens full of pots and crates, past big humming machines and down corridors with pipes that ran along the ceiling. Concrete walls gave way to brick, and lights became more scarce. The entrance to the tunnel was in an empty wine cellar with a dirt floor, behind a dusty piano.

"Not sure how far this goes," he said, while Buffy skeptically assessed the dwarf-sized door and pulled out her flashlight.
"Guess I'll find out." She hesitated, looked up at him. He was staring at the door in a fixed way, thinking his cryptic thoughts or just avoiding her. Faced by his heroic profile she wanted to tell him, *I love you* or maybe just *take care of yourself*; She couldn't help it. She was wired that way. And he turned his head and gazed down at her finally, as if he'd heard the words she wasn't saying, as if she was music only he could hear. His eyes were grey and unblinking, his face smoothed of expression, the corpse of a monster or cold marble of an angel. And when she couldn't bear good-bye another moment, he kissed her, and it was like kissing snow, except for that deep fire place inside her that didn't stop burning.

Every big movie moment had to end, and she gave what she hoped was a convincing smile before she turned and left him.

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When Buffy kicked her way through the bricked-up conduit and discovered she was only a few hundred feet from the tunnel she'd come to consider her freeway home, she felt a stab of guilty pleasure. She stepped back through just long enough to hang Spike's cloak on a heavy piece of rusted wire extending from the inner wall.

Trysts 'r' us, she thought, dragging a few wooden pallets in front of the hole she'd made and giving her handiwork a second's smug regard before dusting off her hands and heading toward the command center.

She entered perkily but stopped midstride in the middle of the room as all eyes turned her way. It was only then that she remembered the bite on her neck. She feigned a casual movement to check the collar of her coat. Her collar was up, and her hair was down, and she smiled at her friends self-consciously, unsure just how much of the night's events were covered.

"Good--" Xander paused ostentatiously to check his watch. "--morning, sunshine." His voice brimmed with the kind of cheery that wasn't. "I thought you were turning in for the night. Help Dawn with her homework, I seem to remember you saying."

"Took a walk instead," said Buffy with short defiance, skimming a glance around the table to take the collective temperature. Dawn thankfully absent, Tara sleepy, Willow only slightly frowny, Xander...Xander. She relaxed a notch. "What's the what?" she asked, approaching the table.

"We're going over the plans you brought," said Tara.

"Since when did we become the night shift?" Buffy wondered, sitting down on a crate slightly distant from the rest.

"Tuesday," said Willow, checking with the others.

"Tuesday," Xander confirmed while Tara nodded agreeably.

"Oh." Sitting down had been a mistake. Buffy felt the waves of tiredness begin lapping at her sense of perk. So much for the second wind, hello suckage of blood loss.

Willow was smiling faintly at her. "This is the fuzzy Buffy. As in fuzzy headed," she added. "Not fuzzy wuzzy."
"This is the very fuzzy Buffy," Buffy said.

"Fuzzy Buffy want a look at the new badness?" asked Xander dryly. He pushed the thin piece of paper her way, and Buffy reluctantly dragged her crate closer and smoothed out the paper's folds. It was a blueprint, larger than she'd expected. After a moment, she turned it clockwise. "Okay. Tired me, but--what am I looking at?"

"Well, Spike said it was plans for a weapon, and I recognize some of the symbols." Willow leaned across the table and traced along lines of print. "These are runes, part of an incantation to the dark powers, specifically the demon Kespet. I'm working on a translation now. The rest of the writing is some kind of demon language I don't know, but mixed with Latin--what I've been able to make out so far are standard spell ingredients for black magic. Verbascum thapsus, achillea millefolium--"

"Gesundeit," said Buffy. "So, do we know what this thing does?"

Willow and Xander exchanged a glance, and Willow sat back down next to Tara.

"We think it go boom," said Xander. "And put heap big hurt on humans."

"We, uh, we don't really know," admitted Willow. A touch of hope lit her eyes. "We thought maybe Spike had more information."

"He said he was on the outs for this. Some secret cable--"

"Cabal," Willow snuck in gently, like Giles used to do.

"--acting inside the Reich. I don't think he knows anything more than what he told me." She glanced around. "I could ask him," she suggested, careful to make it sound like she didn't care one way or the other.

"That's probably a--" began Willow.


"A good idea," Willow said, giving him a pointed look.

"I'll ask him," said Buffy, smoothing her hair down over the left side of her neck.

"You feeling okay?" asked Tara kindly, tilting her head.

Buffy started at the sudden question and felt her cheeks pink under the other woman's direct, witchy gaze. Naturally the others were looking all too interested. "Me?" Buffy squeaked. Get a grip, girl. Do not squeak. "Great. Fine."

"You just look a little..." Tara hesitated as if reconsidering whether to finish her observation. "Pale," she offered apologetically, giving a half-shrug.

Buffy gave a rueful half-smile in return. "My winter complexion isn't exactly helped by our new subcontinental lifestyle."

"It isn't exactly helped by this either," said Xander sharply, reaching out and twitching aside her hair before Buffy could stop him.

She knocked his hand away and covered the wound instinctively.

"You gonna tell me that's frostbite?" Anger had darkened Xander's face.
Unable to answer, Buffy darted a look at the women. Willow looked stricken, Tara shocked.

"I should have staked that walking cadaver years ago." Xander leaned in and stared Buffy down. "And next time I see him, I will."

Buffy's face hardened, and out of the corner of her eye she could see Tara anxiously swing her gaze back and forth between the two of them. "Xander," said Tara. "I-I'm sure that Buffy--"

"Sure that Buffy what," Xander interrupted, not breaking eye contact with Buffy. "Sure that she let herself be a tasty juice box to a bloodsucking fiend? Sure that she gets off on being kibble for the undead?"

"Don't," whispered Buffy.

"What's wrong, Buffy? Too close to the bone? Well, somebody's got to say it. Because I'm only saying what the rest of us are thinking. This whole six-feet-under philia was hard to take when it was just Angel--and I never thought I'd say just Angel, but at least he had a soul."

Willow's voice was a hollow reed. "Xander--"

"And you can just save the my-boyfriend's-a-freedom-fighter rebuttal, because as far as I'm concerned that Nazi uniform he's wearing is exactly what he should be buried in. Except he won't be buried, he'll be dust, and I'm guessing the uniform too, but that's not the point."

Buffy stood, and Xander moved to block her. "Don't," she warned.

"At some point you're going to remember you're the Slayer," said Xander, mere inches between them. "Or he will. And I wouldn't take odds that you'll be the one to remember first."

She stared at him, stony-faced, while he searched her eyes. "Back off," she said deliberately, "or I'll back you off."

Xander didn't move, and Buffy shoved his chest hard enough to send him flying several feet. He landed flat on his back, and before he could get up she leapt and straddled him and pinned him down by the neck, ignoring the alarmed cries from Willow and Tara.

"If you hurt him," she said, leaning forward, "You will never see me again. Any of you. Any of you," she repeated. Her voice was cold and shook with fury. She let go of his neck and stood as Xander gasped in air.

"Buffy." She turned and Willow was in her face, angry and appalled. "You can't just knock around your friends every time you hear something you don't like."

"Something I don't like?" Buffy snapped back. "Try threats of homicide against the man, the, the thing I--" She stopped, exhaling with frustration.

"The thing you what?" Willow stared at her. "Buffy, Xander's right. I mean, we've all been pretty supportive if not actually understanding about Spike. And, okay, he kind of grows on you, in a twisted creature-of-darkness way. But if it's more than just kicks on the side, then--"

"Then what?" Buffy challenged.

"Then you need to let it go." Willow's regret was obviously real, but the voice of moral authority left Buffy dry-eyed and cynical. "You need to get over him."
Buffy turned away, arms crossed. After a minute, she turned back. Willow was unbudging, Xander was standing a few yards off to one side behind her, face still clouded with dangerous feeling, and Tara looked on with concern.

"There's something I need to tell you," Buffy said.

The End, or That's All, Folks!

Notes on the genesis of this story:

Sometimes I think a what-if: what if Joss Whedon called me up and said I'd been chosen as the mopiest girl in all of mopey fandom to be the beneficiary of a Jossified Make a Wish Foundation charity. "Anna, Whedon here, calling from L.A. Sorry about the static. I'm on my cell phone, and the freeway traffic is hell." "Guh?" "So okay, I understand my admin has delivered the skinny. We want you to tell us--where do we go from here?" "Guh?" "Next season, all yours, baby. Plot, character arcs, sudden deaths. Whatever you want--James, watch that latte--whatever you want, just name it." "Guh..."

I have simple, sexy fangirl fantasies. Spike regains his soul, takes over as Buffy's watcher-slash-lover. Spike loses the chip and doesn't regain his soul and battles madly against his dark half, a vampiric beast to Buffy's beauty. Spike regains his soul, becomes William, Buffy falls in love with him, soul is lost, Spike returns, epic unhappiness.

I also have this desire to see the veils between dimensions actually collapse, and a season-long darkness fall over the earth, making Sunnyhell a place of noir chaos: gin joints, smoky bistros, demons and vampires walking freely. Sort of a Casablanca feel to everything, perpetually dark and misty, with a Nazisque regime, a human collaborative government a la Vichy France, and a human Underground, with some demon friendlies aiding their cause. Spike, of course, is a dark and gallant spy, working for the Underground while putting on a demonic facade for the Nazi bastards.

The demon regime is led by a race of nasties who haven't been on earth for thousands of years. They don't know Spike from Adam, so to speak, and he puts on a good front, makes himself useful. The demons who do know him whisper and sow distrust, but he stages a convincing repudiation of Buffy and humanity--in the show itself, we wouldn't even know right away that he was faking--then we later see him sneak off to meet with Buffy and the Scoobies in a secret bunker in the sewer tunnels under the magic shop.

The tunnels have become home to the humans. They live here, cramped, and make their base here, occasionally moving to avoid detection. Dark shadows in the corners, one bright lamp shining on the table where they've laid out their maps. A look-out posted in the tunnel--Xander, who has turned into a broodingly dark and rugged soldier ever since Anya was dragged off to the mines--ready to whistle if anything approaches. Buffy directing their sneak attacks, bombings of demon storage depots, assaults and prison rescues.
Spike has his own role. Spike, through a glass darkly: dressed in a sharp, black Demon-Nazi uniform with silver insignia, his white hair and icy blue eyes setting him apart as one of the elect, lending him a convincing facade of the perfect Nazi gentleman vampire, by all appearances ruthless and cold. He tries to go about his daily business, tries to hide his true feelings behind cutting mockery, a pretense of cruelty. But as he sits at the dinner table with its dazzling white cloth and platters of skulls, watching the demon soldiers laugh and drink goblets of human blood, his eyes fire and his mouth twists with a contemptuous rage he can barely keep in check. Later that night, he will hunt and kill their demon comrades, soundlessly cutting the throats of some, twisting the knife deep into others, no expression on his face.

Stolen moments between Spike and Buffy, enmity forgotten in this new era, passion igniting like a spark in a vast darkness, the only thing that keeps the both of them going. Ravishing kisses as Spike, still in uniform, steals away to the tunnels to meet her, commanded by the note that she gave to a servant. Reckless, hungry meetings late at night, in the small, dank underground room that Buffy--a Slayer in hiding--now calls home. The two of them in the aftermath of passion, Spike rebuttoning his uniform, Buffy drawing on her sweater. Every time they part, they kiss good-bye as if they might never see each other again. Sometimes Buffy's gaze is hard and resigned, grim. Other times, as they leave each other, her face softens and her eyes hold a clear regard.

To everyone else, their relationship has become commonplace. When they meet as a group to make attack plans, when Spike's long elegant finger is tracing out on the map the supply route between the train yard and the demon headquarters, everyone is paying attention. And when, afterwards, coffee is brewed and an effort is being made to keep Dawn's spirits up, and Spike and Buffy draw off to one side and stand close, heads templed and gazes rapt as they murmur, hands grazing each other gently, the others no longer notice.

Joss, I swear by lawyers and all things unholy, you can have this one free of charge. An offering to you, from a fangirl to her geeky god.

posted 12.23.2001

Chapter End Notes

This is all there is of this WIP. Anna S. began it in 2002 and worked on it for 2+ years. Although unfinished, it is one of the classics of Buffyverse fanfic, and I am pleased that Anna S. allowed it to be archived here.

It bears repeating that this story is entirely by Anna S. (eliade).

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!